

**“SAME HELL, DIFFERENT HORRORS”**

**WOMEN IN THE HOLOCAUST: TESTIMONY INTO  
FICTION**

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**“the hell may have been the same for women and men during the Holocaust, but the  
horrors were different”**

**Carol Rittner and John Roth (eds.), *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust*, Paragon  
House, New York, 1993.**

**“Narratives by women survivors... form a group that differs significantly from those by  
men”**

**Myrna Goldenberg, “Different Horrors, Same Hell: Women Remembering the Holocaust” in R.  
S. Gottlieb (ed.), *Thinking the Unthinkable: Meanings of the Holocaust*, Paulist Press, New York,  
1990.**

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## Abstract

This thesis examines women's narratives of the Holocaust, in particular the ways in which women's autobiographies of incarceration have been transformed into fiction. Until recently, women's specifically gendered experiences were generally omitted from consideration. The little regard historians have paid to this aspect of Holocaust history is reflected in the scant attention accorded by mainstream critics of Holocaust literature to representations of gender. In this thesis, women's personal narratives of incarceration have been examined primarily from the perspective of gender in order to identify the particular ways in which women narrate their experiences of incarceration, which in important respects differed from those of men. Drawing heavily on unpublished women's testimonies lodged in the Imperial War Museum, London, and its Sound Archive, this thesis maintains that a distinctive and consistent gendered voice can be heard in women's Holocaust testimony.

The ultimate purpose of the thesis is to examine the ways in which such autobiographical narratives are transformed into fiction, and how this relates to representations of women in novels about the Holocaust. A detailed examination of two works by women writers therefore constitutes the core of the analysis. A further comparative analysis is made between selected male and female Holocaust fictions to show the crucial ways in which they differ in the representation of women's experiences. This thesis argues that while the women writers under consideration echo the voices of historical women, within male texts these autobiographical voices are distorted or even erased by the extensive use made of prior literary stereotypes of women from popular fictions, such as those found within Gothic literature or even pornography.

# Contents

Chapter 1 INTRODUCTION	1
Chapter 2 HOLOCAUST LITERARY CRITICISM: AN OVERVIEW	15
Chapter 3 WOMEN REMEMBER THE HOLOCAUST: A CONSIDERATION OF UNPUBLISHED TESTIMONIES	50
Chapter 4 ILONA KARMEL: <i>AN ESTATE OF MEMORY</i>	89
Chapter 5 SUSAN FROMBERG SHAEFFER: <i>ANYA</i>	118
Chapter 6 MALE- AND FEMALE-AUTHORED HOLOCAUST FICTIONS: A COMPARISON	142
Chapter 7 CONCLUSION	165
GLOSSARY	172
BIBLIOGRAPHY	173



# Chapter 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Genocide and Gender

Was genocide blind to gender? Were men and women in the Holocaust treated in exactly the same way by the Nazis? Did they experience incarceration in ghettos and concentration camps in identical ways? Did they behave in the same way?

Do their narratives present a unified view of suffering from which gender is absent, and in which their biological differences played no part?

The answer to all of these questions is, of course, no. David Patterson argues that 'a primary aim of the architects of the Holocaust' was not simply 'annihilating the womanhood that might become motherhood' (1990: 187) but all that signified the feminine: 'not only... women but... womanhood' were targeted by the Nazis in their 'emphasis on racism, materialism, and power' (178).

Yet as late as 1998, Lawrence L. Langer, an influential Holocaust literary critic, asserts (1998: 43) that 'Listening to the voices of women who survived those domains reminds us of the severely diminished role that gendered behavior played during those cruel years'. As Carol Rittner and John Roth (1993: xi) find, 'Much of the most widely read scholarship – historical, sociopolitical, philosophical, and religious – treats the Holocaust as if sexual and gender differences did not make a difference'.

A circular process seems responsible for what Sara Horowitz (Ofer and Weitzman, 1998) sees as 'the marginality of women's experiences in constructing a master narrative of the Nazi genocide' (367): 'works by women survivors are cited less frequently in scholarly studies, women's experiences are rarely central to the presentation of a "typical" Holocaust story, and significant works by women soon fall out of print, becoming unavailable for classroom use' (369). Consequently, 'How we think about and how we teach the Holocaust has been based predominantly on the testimony – written and oral – of male survivors' (369). Sybil Milton (Bridenthal, Grossmann and Kaplan (eds.), 1984: 297) has observed that 'The classic secondary literature on the Holocaust is not sex-specific in language, referring to prisoners,

victims, survivors, and perpetrators. This limits any analysis of gender-specific experiences and conditions'.

Historically, the possibility that a universal, genderless narrative could "master" both men's and women's experiences became untenable from the moment of arrival at the concentration camp. Miklos Nyiszli's Auschwitz experience is typical: 'To start, the SS divided us according to sex, leaving all children under fourteen with their mothers' (1993: 18). In this group went Nyiszli's wife and fourteen year-old daughter. The second phase of selection grouped together 'the aged, the crippled, the feeble, and women with children under fourteen'. Nyiszli states that after segregation 'We no longer had any way of speaking to each other; all we could do was make signs' (19). The final page of his narrative records how at their reunion after the war both women 'sobbed uncontrollably' for hours. What Nyiszli describes as this 'language I was well familiar with' (222) is recognisable also as a literary means of reducing women's narrative to wordless emotional outpouring. Here, as on the Auschwitz ramp, they must "sign" their separate experiences.

This thesis argues that male narrative cannot convey the differing, gendered reactions to the same experiences of starvation, grief, terror, disease, inhuman conditions; of forced labour and physical punishment, something many women were experiencing for the first time in their lives. It cannot articulate women's *different* experiences: of menstruation, when a woman might be gassed for showing blood on her clothes<sup>1</sup>, of the cessation of menstruation and the fear of permanent infertility; of the loss of feminine identity when women's head and body hair was shaved, when their breasts disappeared and their bodies became manlike; of the frequent sexual abuse and the sexualisation of events such as showering, delousing and labour selections; of the abiding terror of rape.

Most of all, it cannot convey the most extreme experiences of woman doctors such as Gisela Perl and Olga Lengyel, who along with others practised abortion to save women's lives from the Nazi dictum which stated that women and their newborn babies were to be murdered together (Perl, 1992: 80-1; Lengyel, 1995: 113-5). Nor can it describe the feelings of the survivor whose newborn baby was killed, and whose testimony Langer cites in his essay which declares gender unimportant<sup>2</sup>.

Sexuality and gender, as several feminist critics have noted, are separable; 'gender... is socially constructed rather than biologically inevitable' (Lips, 1997: xii). Yet Nazi constructions of gender reduced women to their biology, seeing them purely in terms of their capacity to reproduce an anathematised race. Nazi ideology placed women in what recent studies (Rittner and Roth, 1993: 3; Baumel, 1998) term double jeopardy; they were attacked because of both their race and their gender. As Rittner and Roth argue, 'Sexism... can exist without racism, but whenever claims are made that one race is superior to any or all others, discrimination directed



at women is unlikely to be far behind'. Any 'consistent Nazi plan' had to 'target Jewish women specifically as women, for they were the only ones who would finally be able to ensure the continuity of Jewish life' (1993: 2). Heinrich Himmler's writings confirm this: "'We came to the question: what about the women and children... I did not regard myself as justified in exterminating the men... while letting avengers in the shape of children... grow up. The difficult decision had to be taken to make this people disappear from the face of the earth'"<sup>3</sup>.

The Nazis' construction of Jewishness was unstable enough to enable many Jews to "pass" as Aryan; Fania Fénelon discovered that even in Auschwitz, Nazi bureaucracy fumbled over its own race ideology (Fénelon, 1977: 70-81). Biology, however, is an inescapable distinction. The convergence of racism and sexism made women, 'especially Jewish but also non-Jewish women... central targets as women' (Rittner and Roth, 1993: 322). Joan Ringelheim maintains that 'Jewish women are the targets of Nazis because they are Jews, but they are attacked and used as women – as mothers, as objects of sexual derision and exploitation, as persons less valuable than men' (Gottlieb (ed.), 1990: 146).

Because of their ideological nature, gender constructions are fluid; 'there is not a *single* stereotype of masculinity or of femininity. Rather, these constructs are somewhat specific to time and place; they are continually being reworked and their boundaries renegotiated' (Lips, 1997: 4). Sidonie Smith and Gisela Brinker-Gabler (1997: 11) believe that nationalism has always relied on 'essentialized sexual differences': 'Various forms of nationalism secure and in turn depend upon specific constructions of femininity [and] masculinity'. Yet several sources indicate that Nazism gave rise to some particularly negative female stereotypes. Nazi ideology was 'undergirded' by an 'extreme masculinity and misogyny' (Goldenberg, Gottlieb (ed.), 1990: 163). Nazi doctrine 'To a degree unique in Western history... created a society structured around "natural" biological poles', one whose '*Weltanschauung* [was] based on race and sex as the immutable categories of human nature'. (Koonz, 1987: 5-6). Furthermore, Klaus Theweleit finds in German prewar fascist literature 'strangely ambivalent emotions' towards women which 'vacillate between... aggressiveness and veneration, hatred, anxiety, alienation, and desire' (1996 Vol I: 24). The 'various threats' of Jewishness' (1996 Vol II: 14) – disease, criminality, political subversion (13) – were all 'able to be assembled within the category woman' (14n). The Jewish woman was 'More dangerous still'; within her 'all possible threats cluster together simultaneously' (13). In this weird taxonomy, all women are tainted with Jewish attributes while Jewish women are pregnant with all the terrors their race holds. Dominick LaCapra (1994) notes that 'The Jews, like homosexuals, were coded culturally as feminine' (105); they constituted a body of outsiders within the German nation itself – the most 'destabilising [source] of phobic anxiety and quasi-ritual contamination' (104) for a nation which idealised purity.

Can we infer that within Nazism femininity itself was viewed as the wellspring of such contamination? Misogyny was enshrined in German anxieties about race from the end of the



nineteenth century. Gisela Bock finds that women were 'hailed as "mothers of the race," or, in stark contrast, vilified as guilty of "racial degeneration"' (Rittner and Roth (eds): 1993: 163). With the Nazis these anxieties intensified. Policies of 'compulsory motherhood' – via anti-abortion laws – and 'prohibition of motherhood' via sterilisation formed 'two sides of a coherent policy combining sexism and racism' (168).

Gender, then, came to matter *more* in the Holocaust, not less. This tends to weaken what Joan Ringelheim (Gottlieb (ed.), 1990: 145) describes as the "'banality of sexism'" argument, which runs that 'taking account of sexism adds nothing to our understanding of the Holocaust because the oppression of women is so commonplace. Since it is part of everyday life, it must have been part of the Holocaust'. This dismissal may in reality mask anxieties about revealing the extent to which, as Ringelheim (Ofer and Weitzman (eds.), 1998: 345) argues, 'the sexism of Nazi ideology and the sexism of the Jewish community met in a tragic and involuntary alliance'. She also suggests that recognising 'the continuities of women's oppression' in the Holocaust 'puts into question some of the claims about the uniqueness of the Holocaust' (Gottlieb (ed.), 1990: 145). Yet what is surely noteworthy is that women were specifically targeted for extermination *for no other reason* than their biological ability to reproduce a vilified race.

The women and young children whom Nyiszli saw segregated on the Auschwitz ramp were gassed along with the sick and elderly. Enzo Traverso describes the Nazis' 'genocidal policy' as existing in a state of 'permanent tension between productivity and annihilation'; German industry had 'an interest in the exploitation of the Jewish labour force in the framework of "extermination through work"' which ran counter to 'the imperative of annihilation' (1999: 15). Yet Nazi gender stereotyping presumed women inadequate even productively to be worked to death in the early years, until labour shortages and bomb damage reduced the Nazis to desperation near the end of the war. Until this time, women between fifteen and forty-nine, who 'not only could bear children but already had children... were clearly some of the most useless persons to the Nazis and in that category were to be killed immediately' (Ringelheim in Rittner and Roth 1993: 397). Generally, women were ignorant that they were being 'sentenced... to death because they were mothers' (Ofer and Weitzman (eds.), 1998: 11). Yet Ruth Bondy (Ofer and Weitzman (eds.), 324) remembers that all but two of at least one group of around six hundred women in 1944 chose to be gassed with their children rather than volunteer for a labour selection, leaving them to die alone.

A passage from Tadeusz Borowski's short story, "This way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentleman" (1976: 43) illustrates the way biology and gender ideology created for women a fatal double bind. A young mother who knows what awaits her arrives at the Auschwitz ramp:

Here is a woman – she walks quickly, but tries to appear calm. A small child with a pink cherub's face runs after her and, unable to keep up, stretches out his little arms and cries: 'Mama! Mama!'

'Pick up your child, woman!'

'It's not mine, sir, not mine!' She shouts hysterically and runs on, covering her face with her hands... She is young, healthy, good-looking, she wants to live.

But the child runs after her, wailing loudly: 'Mama, Mama, don't leave me!'

'It's not mine, not mine, no!'

Andrei, a sailor from Sevastopol, grabs hold of her... With one powerful blow he knocks her off her feet, then, as she falls, takes her by the hair and pulls her up again. His face twitches with rage.

'Ah, you bloody Jewess! So you're running from your own child! I'll show you, you whore!' His huge hand chokes her, he lifts her in the air and heaves her onto the truck...

'Here! And take this with you, bitch!' and he throws the child at her feet. '...

'good work. That's the way to deal with degenerate mothers,' says the SS man.

It is impossible to know how many women died because they were mothers: those gassed immediately were never registered (Ringelheim, Rittner and Roth (eds.), 1993: 393).

Kali Tal, quoting Barbara Johnson, believes that cultural impulses to unify and simplify experience are "'fantasies of domination, not understanding'"<sup>4</sup>, and these impulses clearly operate within our understanding of the Holocaust, even at the cost of falsifying history. Roberto Benigni in his 1999 award-winning film *Life is Beautiful* reinvents Borowski's scene as a *male* self-sacrificial myth of the "trickster" hero. Guido, the father of seven year-old Joshua, successfully smuggles and hides the child in a benign Auschwitz where he has leisure to reinvent atrocity for his son. Incarceration becomes a game where the aim is to outwit the Nazis: the winner on points is awarded the big American tank which signifies liberation (in reality, the Russians liberated Auschwitz).

Compare Benigni's scene with Borowski's:

*the train is... stopped. On both sides of it, armed German guards, four per freight car, are opening the doors and setting up exit ramps. The sun is peeping through a brick wall topped with barbed wire.*

*The women exit on one side of the train, the men on the other, prodded by sharp commands, threats and shoves...*

*As soon as he is out of the train, Guido, ignoring the confusion, hands the half-asleep Joshua to his uncle and goes looking for Dora. But the women are on the other side. He can only see her from afar, through the open doors of one of the cars. She is distraught with exhaustion and blinded by the light (Benigni and Cerami, 1999: 101-2).*

The film broke Italian box office records, won awards and received huge acclaim in America. For film critic Justin Cartwright, 'The central premise, that the father should try to shield his son from the realities of the camp by pretending it is a game is unconvincing and ultimately embarrassing'<sup>5</sup>. Jonathan Romney argues that society has 'turned a corner in the way we think about the Holocaust when a film this naively blundering can pass without question'<sup>6</sup>. Neither critic questions if the film's blunders may be historical; both are objecting to the film's repackaging of Auschwitz as the site of comedy.



## 1.2. The role of gender in Holocaust history

In the European Jewish communities before the Holocaust, 'men and women lived in gender-specific worlds' (Ofer and Weitzman (eds.), 1998: 3). Paula Hyman finds that Western middle-class Jewish families conformed to the model of 'bourgeois domesticity'; men concerned themselves with business and politics, women with home-making (Ofer and Weitzman (eds.), 1998: 25). Eastern Jews aspired to this ideal; most did not achieve it; out of economic necessity 'male and female roles were less rigidly divided' and women 'participated actively in secular public and economic life' (31). On top of this, they were the homemakers. As Nazism spread, this task became harder: basic commodities disappeared, men became unemployed. More women had to find paid work. Still responsible for the home, they also had now to keep up the morale of men and children demoralised by discrimination (Ofer and Weitzman (eds.), 1998: 3-4).

While German Jewish women in particular were perhaps more emancipated than gentile women before the Nazi rise to power, Marion Kaplan finds that afterwards they became less so (Rittner and Roth (eds.), 1993: 190-1). More dependent than men on their friends, they suffered more from isolation as antisemitism became widespread (194). Their employment prospects, once they were barred from the professions and universities, were more limited. The belief that 'girls would not need a career because they would marry' persisted 'even as that fantasy became more inconsistent with reality' (196). Jewish welfare organisations gave 'preferential treatment to boys seeking career training' (196), in trades that would later often aid them in surviving initial selection at the concentration camp.

Kaplan believes that women were quicker to see the dangers of Nazism and more accurate in assessing it, picking up through networks of friends 'the minutiae (and significance) of ordinary details' while men analysed the 'confusing legal and economic decrees and the often contradictory public utterances of the Nazis' (200). Others support this view (Koonz, 1987: 349). One woman was sent by her husband to listen to the village's illegal radio: 'he used to tell me, "You are so aware of the news... You listen better"'<sup>7</sup>. Yet men typically made the decisions about emigration; economically, they had more to lose by leaving. In actuality, fewer women than men emigrated. Up to the war men were in greater physical danger. Women found jobs more easily than men in the expanding Jewish social service sector while men emigrated ahead to jobs or relatives abroad. Daughters stayed to look after elderly relatives while 'sons went their way without any thought' (Kaplan in Rittner and Roth (eds.), 1993: 203).

Throughout Europe 'Most Jews believed – at least in the beginning – that the Germans were "civilized" and would honour traditional gender norms', leaving woman and children unharmed. The Jews 'responded with gender-specific plans': men 'typically' went first into hiding, migration or escape and had priority for exit visas. This 'male exodus' meant that 'a majority of the Jewish population in many ghettos' were women (Ofer and Weitzman (eds.), 1998: 5).



In prewar Poland, 'Women's salaries in most industries were half or less than half of men's' (Ofer in Ofer and Weitzman (eds.), 1998: 144). In Lodz, Michael Unger notes that this tradition continued in the ghetto, even when women did the same work (Ofer and Weitzman (eds.), 1998) 133). This aggravated the 'unspeakably harsh conditions' (124) in which the many women without men 'bore the heavy dual burden of earning a livelihood and taking care of their families' (129). Yet 'the impression one gets from testimonies and diaries... is that women adjusted better than men to ghetto conditions and coped better with the hunger and the harsh and changing circumstances' (125). Emmanuel Ringelblum poignantly describes men's lives after women had been deported: '*Apartments without women* – consequently filthy, neglected' (1981: 317).

Ghettoisation has been described as 'the greatest disaster' for the women of Warsaw. The loss of furniture and household goods fell most heavily on them (Ofer in Ofer and Weitzman (eds.), 1998: 152); employment prospects were reduced at a time when women increasingly needed paid income (163); most of the unemployed were women, 'essentially starving to death', selling what remained of their belongings or begging. Street trading was unsafe (153), smuggling was even more so (155), yet women often had no choice; those who were refugees from other towns had little or nothing to sell (153). As in Lodz, if women found work in the small industrial shops owned by Germans they worked in 'deplorable' conditions for less than non-Jewish women (161); they would typically get up at 5.00 a.m. to do housework before a 7.00 a.m. start (162). Children were often left alone without supervision. Many starving women saved the food which was part of their wage for their families (161-2). Some women 'were ready to manipulate sex for survival' if that was all they had to sell (163); Ringelblum states that 'Recently streetwalking has become notable... Necessity drives people to anything' (1981: 120).

Women were also manipulated into trading sex. Sociological and historical studies point to an 'overwhelming predominance of men in German-organized Jewish councils and administrative positions' in the ghettos (Ofer and Weitzman (eds.), 1998: 6). A woman whom Joan Ringelheim interviewed remembers that while to a limited extent women "'survived partly by brains'" and could lead their own lives, women "'also survived by your male connections. It was the males who had the main offices, who ran the kitchens... [The] *Judenrat* [was] running [the ghetto and the Jewish men] *used* it. And did they *use* it. *Did* they use it. That was how you survived as a woman – through the male.'" (Rittner and Roth (eds.), 1993: 376). Another Jewish survivor 'reported to [Ringelheim] that "I had two enemies, Nazis and men"'<sup>8</sup>. Officials dealing with women attempting to gain exit visas for their families from Germany might also demand sex as payment (Kaplan, 1998: 72).

Historians disagree about the level of violence women faced before ghettoisation. Koonz (1987: 349) states that in Germany, 'Until the deportations began in 1941 the Gestapo, SA, police, and angry mobs assaulted only men'; Sybil Milton (Bridenthal, Grossmann and Kaplan (eds.), 1984) finds that 'Normal social inhibitions still operative before 1939 prevented street



violence against even Jewish women, despite their position as social pariahs' (300) although rapes occurred 'during the excesses of "Crystal Night"' in 1938 (301). However, the 'unending barrage of insults and propaganda' (300) to which Jewish women were subject in the prewar years had darker undertones: "'In daylight they reviled me as a Jewish woman and at night they wanted to kiss me'" (Kaplan, 1998: 61). Another woman recalled the "'brazen advances"' made by SS and SA men; she could only reject them by saying she was married: "'If I had said I was Jewish, they would have turned the tables and insisted that I had approached them'". Arrest for prostitution could result in torture and death (Koonz, 1987: 347).

Forced labour for women in Poland before ghettoisation often took the form of an assault on gender. In Warsaw in February 1940 Ringelblum (1981: 17) records that 'Both yesterday and today women were seized for labor... They're ordered to wash the pavement with their panties, then put them on again wet'. Chaim Kaplan writes that in Lodz in December 1939, women were compelled to clean the excrement from a latrine with their blouses. Then 'the Nazis wrapped their faces in the blouses, filthy with the remains of excrement, and laughed uproariously' (1999: 87).

Sexual assault and rape occurred in 'a clear violation of German policy' (Ofer and Weitzman (eds.), 1998: 7). Felicja Karay encountered 'Dozens of testimonies' of 'individual and collective rapes of Jewish women' by German commanders and their guests at Skarzysko-Kamienna camp. Because race laws forbade such sexual relations, the victims were often shot or sent for selection (Ofer and Weitzman (eds.), 1998: 290-1). One of Ringelheim's interviewees recalls that in the Warsaw ghetto 'a young SS officer [would] spot beautiful Jewish women, go to their houses, and rape them. Afterwards he would shoot them. He always came prepared with a horse-drawn hearse'. The real extent of sexual assault is hard to assess. While Ringelheim encountered 'many stories about sexual abuse' – in some cases by Jewish men – in the course of her research, she equally found that 'Some [women] think it inappropriate to talk about these matters; discussions about sexuality desecrate the memories of the dead, or the living, or the Holocaust itself. For others, it is simply too difficult or painful. Still others think it may be a trivial issue' (Rittner and Roth 1993: 377).

To Milton (Rittner and Roth 1993: 230) the belief that 'Jewish women were forced to serve... in the SS bordellos and frequently raped' represents a 'popular postwar myth, sometimes exploited and sensationalized'. Yet almost no women's narrative is free of this fear. Judith Magyar Isaacson (1991: 44) recalls widespread rumors of 'Jewish women being transported to the Russian front as forced prostitutes to German soldiers'. Latvians, Ukrainians and other nationalities used as camp guards and assisting the *Einsatzgruppen* were not governed by Nazi racial laws forbidding sexual contact with Jews, nor were the liberating Russians. Isaacson's friend was raped and then shot by them. Another woman tells her: "'Thousands of women were raped during the war, but no one hears about them'" (143).



Claims have been made by influential writers on incarceration that the sex urge disappeared in the concentration camp (Des Pres, 1976: 189; Cohen, 1988: 74). Numerous women's narratives state that both men's and women's sexual urges still persisted (Lingens-Reiner, 1948: 106; Lengyel, 1995: 195; Perl, 1992: 57-8); they recall how more privileged male prisoners exploited women's desperate need of everyday articles for survival. The contention that male incarcerated did *not* desire sex thus appears to camouflage the reality. Kogon records that brothels were established in a number of concentration camps by a 1945 directive of Heinrich Himmler's; in them, some prisoners 'drained their last physical reserves' (1998: 135-6). For other prisoners, homosexuality – including coercive sex – served these needs (38). Elie Cohen admits that a number of male prisoners, 'mainly "prominents"... were not hungry, and not engaged in a fierce struggle for life; to them the sexual drive was indeed of importance' (1988: 141). He states that brothels were established in 1943, dating Himmler's directive to the summer of that year; these were for "'Aryans'", used mainly by the "green triangle" prisoners, the criminals (142). Cohen states that 'On the whole [male] prisoners prefer not to speak on this subject' (141).

Women's lack of status within the ghettos meant that many more women than men were deported to the concentration camps. Although there is little or no breakdown of the total Holocaust dead by gender, deportation figures suggest that women were gassed in greater numbers than men; more women than men were executed by the *Einsatzgruppen* (Ringelheim in Rittner and Roth (eds.), 1993: 393-5). Kaplan states that 'more German-Jewish women than men were deported and murdered after October 1941' (Bridenthal, Grossmann and Kaplan (eds.), 1984: 301).

Konnilyn Feig maintains that 'since the *core* of Nazi racial and population policy dealt with the woman, and since *anatomy was indeed destiny to the Nazis*, yes, women had it worse'. She suggests that while in the concentration camp, 'Environmentally, probably women had it no worse than men' they 'may have suffered more' because they were unprepared for harsh physical labour (1983: 171). However, the Auschwitz commandant Rudolph Hoess states that 'From every point of view, and at all times, the worst conditions prevailed in the women's camp'; it was overcrowded – 'crammed to the roof within days' – the latrines and wash-houses were inadequate (1995: 137); 'everything was much more difficult, harsher and more depressing for the women, since general living conditions... were incomparably worse' (134). Pery Broad, another SS official, confirms this: conditions in Birkenau, the women's camp, were 'considerably worse' than in Auschwitz 'where they were bad enough. Feet sank into a sticky bog at every step. There was nearly no washing water. The prisoners slept, six in one bed, on wooden plankbeds placed one upon the other in three tiers. Most of the beds were deprived of straw pallets' (Bezwinska and Czech (eds.), 1972: 141). Yet Myra Goldenberg (Gottlieb (ed.), 1990: 154) asserts that once in Auschwitz 'women apparently withstood incarceration better than men'. Hoess (1995: 133) confirms this: 'from my observations [women] had in general far



greater toughness and powers of endurance than the men, both physically and mentally'; although he notes, significantly, that at the death of a 'near relative' they would 'lose their grip and fade away' to a more noticeable extent than did men (134).

How might this have come about? As numerous accounts testify (see chapter 3, pp. 69-73), women's induction into concentration camp was deeply traumatising, an assault on their feminine identity which followed close on the loss of family. Vera Laska recalls that the SS 'made lewd remarks, pointed at them, commented on their shapes, made obscene suggestions, poked into their breasts with riding crops and [set] their dogs on them. It was the most shocking of all the shocks, a deep blow to their very womanhood'. Almost without exception, the shaving of head and body hair are represented as assaults on feminine identity. Many subsequent events, such as searches of body cavities, were sexualised. 'On the rare occasions that the women were marched to the real showers... the grapevine somehow always reached the lewdest of the SS, who came to jeer, tease and taunt the defenseless women. Stripping the women naked was also practiced at times of camp selections, or on long and boring Sunday afternoons, when the SS had nothing better to do than to order a roll call and expose the powerless women to a cruel parade (Rittner and Roth (eds.), 1993: 266).

Yet women's gendered skills quickly became coping strategies. In the Auschwitz-Birkenau family camp, men and women could still meet clandestinely, and comparisons were possible between their relative adaptive skills. Survivor Ruth Bondy (Ofer and Weitzman (eds.), 1998: 323) remembers that

only a day after their arrival, the differences between the sexes was already striking. The men, in... trousers and coats thrown to them at random – too short, too long, too wide, too small – looked like sad black storks. The women, also wearing garments that had been distributed to them at random, had somehow succeeded in only twenty-four hours in adjusting them to their bodies and sewing up the holes, using needles made out of wooden splinters and threads pulled out of the one blanket allocated to them.

In the camps both Jewish and non-Jewish women 'swapped recipes and ways of extending limited quantities of food'; they 'shared and pooled their limited resources better than did men (Milton in Rittner and Roth (eds.), 1993: 227). Their greater attention to hygiene and cleanliness may have lowered the spread of disease (228-9) besides maintaining morale (227). Separated from their families, small groups of women formed "camp families" within their barracks or work-crews: 'usually not biologically related, [these] increased protection for individual internees and created networks to "organize"' (229) – food, clothing, better work details. Janny Brandes-Brilleslijper (Lindwer (ed.), 1999: 66) describes the tendency for couples – sisters or mothers and daughters – to team up with other couples as 'a "sister complex"'. Edith Baneth's testimony (Appendix I: 10) shows strong evidence of this. Heidi Fried's testimony suggests that "camp families" might emerge naturally from the "fives" formation the Germans demanded for counting (1996: 86). Women 'repaired their ragged garments and groomed themselves carefully despite the lack of water for washing: this imitation of normal behaviour was a conscious and rational



attempt at survival' (Milton, Rittner and Roth (eds.), 1993: 230). Shared fantasy, storytelling and reminiscing, religious observance, celebrations of birthdays and entertainments figure in many women's narratives as means of bonding and creating an interlude – however limited – in the atrocious conditions.

Goldenberg (Ofer and Weitzman (eds.), 1998: 337) argues that such bonding behaviour 'was not exclusive to women, but it is hard to find consistent evidence of men's caring about one another to the extent that women did'. Among men, Cohen states, 'if everybody's life is at stake, very little comradeship is evident. Then people will not make sacrifices or take any risk' (1988: 183). Men 'did not remain or become fathers as readily as women became mothers or nurturers' (Ringelheim in Rittner and Roth (eds.), 1993: 378). They typically figure incarceration as 'the struggle of each one against all' (Levi, 1987: 48). Cohen states: 'I am convinced that [comradeship] did not reveal itself until individual danger of life had ceased to be present' (1988: 183). This qualifier – borne out by other male survivors, Levi among them – points to a crucial difference in male and female representations of incarceration from the moment of entering the concentration camp: among women, the 'stinking, hungry, battered outcast of a *zugang*' – a new prisoner – was often helped to survive by her fellow incarcerated (Nomberg-Przytyk, 1985: 13, 17); the male *zugang*, as Levi states, was 'derided and subject to cruel pranks', a 'target' on whom prisoners visited 'the offences received from above' (1989: 24-5).

### 1.3 The arguments against a gendered study of the Holocaust

In the course of their research, Ofer and Weitzman encountered four main objections to a gendered study of the Holocaust: it would deflect attention from genocide; superimpose contemporary feminist considerations; trivialise the Holocaust; and lead to 'invidious comparisons' of male and female behaviour (1998: 12-13).

The first argument can be countered by Gisela Bock's assertion that 'complex links' bind racism and sexism together. The Nazi laws enforcing abortion and sterilisation on women designated 'ethnically or socially inferior' she terms '*sexist racism*' because they position such women as deviant from presupposed norms for superior women. Those who were denied abortion and pressured to procreate because they were seen as '*women of a specific ethnicity or social position declared superior*' were victims of '*racist sexism*' (Rittner and Roth (eds.), 1993: 178).

With regard to the second, when historian Raul Hilberg (Berenbaum & Peck, 1998: 9-10) claims that the opening of archives in the former Soviet Union and East Germany is currently transforming Holocaust thinking, he sounds no alarm that new knowledge may raise new

issues, nor does he suggest that these sources be protected from modern analytical methodology. As Ofer and Weitzman argue, 'changes in conventions' such as the shift of emphasis from political to social history, which 'places the individual at the center of our studies', inevitably introduce new perspectives which 'enrich our understanding of the past' (14). Rather than deflecting attention from atrocity, a study of gender particularises it, 'locating it in the specificity of individual experience' (13). Individual testimony forms, after all, the foundation of Holocaust study. Ringelheim (Gottlieb (ed.), 1990: 143) stresses the 'complexities' of incarceration: 'no two Jews experienced... the Holocaust in quite the same way, even if they were in the same place at the same time'. For Shoshana Felman (Felman and Laub (eds.), 1992: 223), Claude Lanzmann's film *Shoah* demonstrates the truth of this: 'there is no possible representation of one witness by another'; the film 'goes from singular to singular' (223), 'exploding any possible enclosure – any conceptual frame' for fitting testimony into 'one coherent whole' (223-4).

The two final objections can be taken together. As Ringelheim (Rittner and Roth (eds.), 1993: 379) states, "'women's work' – activities centering around food, children, clothing, shelter, social relations, warmth, cleanliness – may be regarded as the only meaningful labor in a time of such dire necessity'. Koonz and others (Baumel, 1998: 150) suggest that men 'underwent a certain "feminization" in the camps; they 'learned to share, trust, and comfort one another, admit their fears, and to hope together. But most men had to learn behaviors women already knew' (1987: 381). Women's upbringing 'prepared them for hardship because they arrived in the camps with certain survival skills' (380). Comparisons of male and female behaviour abound in historical narrative since its inception; there are no such general objections that these trivialise history. As Gershon Bacon (Ofer and Weitzman (eds.), 1998: 64) states, 'It would be a mistake to regard the Holocaust period, no matter how unique its horrors, as somehow detached from the rest of history'.

S. Lillian Kremer identifies a core difference when she states that 'In male writing the theme of individuality, of one's own resourcefulness, predominates over the theme of communal cooperation' to be found in women's narrative (1999: 8). For Goldenberg women are 'extraordinary caring'; men 'competed against one another for survival but lacked essential skills necessary to survive' (Gottlieb (ed.), 1990: 151). A woman survivor '[explained] that women and men behaved in the concentration camps as they had before' (152).

#### 1.4 In conclusion

This chapter has shown that while 'men and women did suffer the "same hell" at Auschwitz... the horrors were often remarkably different' (Rittner and Roth, 1993: 105). Langer, denying that

gender was influential in survival, argues that 'nothing could be crueler or more callous than the attempt to dredge up from... universal destruction a mythology of comparative endurance that awards favor to one group of individuals over another' (1998: 58). Yet, as the following chapter will suggest, male survivor narrative has been particularly reliant on the autobiographical strategies of heroism and spiritual resistance which within our culture has long been valorised; and it is these norms which have been universalised into "master" narratives.



## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> See Sereny, G. *Into That Darkness*, Andre Deutsch, 1991, p. 238. Several women's testimonies allude to fears that showing menstrual blood could mean gassing.

<sup>2</sup> Langer (1998: 51) cites the testimony Tape T-2045 of Arina B. in the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale University.

<sup>3</sup> Ringelheim (Ofer and Weitzman 1998: 345) cites Smith, B. F. and Peterson A. F. (eds.), *Heinrich Himmler: Geheimreden 1933 bis 1945*, Propylaen, Frankfurt, 1974; no page reference is given.

<sup>4</sup> Tal (1996: 52) cites Johnson, B. "Metaphor, Metonymy and Voice" in *"Their Eyes Were Watching God," Black Literature and Literary Theory*, H. L. Gates (ed.), Methuen, New York, 1984, p. 218.

<sup>5</sup> See Cartwright, J. "Why the Holocaust is no laughing matter", *The Guardian* 2, Monday, 29 March, 1999, p. 9.

<sup>6</sup> See Romney, J. "Camping it up", *The Guardian Review*, Friday, February 12, 1999, p. 6.

<sup>7</sup> See the testimony of Nina Matathias in Gurewitsch, B. (ed.), *Mothers, Sisters, Resisters: Oral Histories of Women Who Survived the Holocaust*, The University of Alabama Press, Tuscaloosa and London, 1998, p. 30.

<sup>8</sup> See Rittner, C. and Roth, J. K., Introduction to Joan Ringelheim's essay "Women and the Holocaust: A Reconsideration of Research" (1993: 374).

## Chapter 2

### HOLOCAUST LITERARY CRITICISM: AN OVERVIEW

#### 2.1 Context

This chapter aims to provide a chronological overview of selected critical works by some of the most influential writers on Holocaust literature from 1949 to the present. Throughout this thesis other critics' works will be cited where appropriate.

It will show how early critics such as Theodor Adorno and George Steiner focus on the ethics of representing the Holocaust in art, in response to Adorno's own contention, first made in 1949, that 'To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric' (1995: 34). Adorno himself re-examines this contention in subsequent essays. Steiner asks whether literature – which, having colluded with Nazism, he regards as compromised (1985: 81) – had not better be silent on the subject: "'No poetry after Auschwitz,'" said Adorno' (72).

From Adorno's assertion – articulating a central critical fear that the fundamental process of making art about the Holocaust inevitably exploits its victims – stems the ongoing preoccupation with representation: what form of narrative most faithfully describes an event whose signification is itself the subject of debate. Was it 'phenomenologically unique' as Steven Katz argues<sup>1</sup>, or can it, as Ian Kershaw suggests, be seen as an evolutionary process whose catalyst was the prewar cultural destabilisation (1998: 74-80) whose 'hallmark' was 'a high level of political violence' (170)? This is not simply a clash of theories; it is an important distinction which colours literary critical debate. Alvin H. Rosenfeld (1988: 20) bases his analysis on the claim that Holocaust literature is 'simply and complexly something else, as the cataclysm which triggered it was something else, and not part of the general storm that swept over Europe four decades ago'. James E. Young, conversely, maintains throughout his 1988 work that Holocaust literatures evolve out of the diverse literatures and cultures of its survivors. However, when Enzo Traverso (1999: 72) argues that 'In memory something can be *absolutely* unique; in history uniqueness is always *relative*' we can begin to understand that the narrator of a Holocaust memoir might *represent* the experience as unique at the same time as s/he utilises traditionally accepted forms of narrative and recognisable elements of other genres in order to make such a claim. Criticism such as Rosenfeld's thus appears to stop halfway: accepting this claim at face value.



Young's critical praxis, then, appears more insightful than Rosenfeld's, allowing us more deeply to interrogate the claims Holocaust narratives make, rather than simply endorsing them. As Young argues, 'some critics have viewed themselves as much the guardians of these texts as their interpreters... protecting – even privileging... survivors' testimony from "heretical" readings that undermine these texts' authority' (1990: 5). Rosenfeld provides a particularly good example of such protective criticism; in a hierarchy of narrative authenticity, those survivors rank highest who, like Leon Wells, left the concentration camp with a sheaf of notes on his experience tied to his belt (Rosenfeld, 1988: 65). The paradoxical reality, as Young points out, was that these eyewitnesses were perhaps the least able to understand a system deliberately designed utterly to confuse them (1990: 33-4). Insisting 'that Holocaust narrative actually establish the documentary evidence to which it aspires' (18) is counterproductive; It '[ignores] the ways in which Holocaust literary testimony is also constructed and interpretive' (21).

Prior to the nineteen-eighties, incarceration narrative was rarely considered critically in relation to gender. Terrence Des Pres' influential work *The Survivor* is a telling example of this. Anatomising the various aspects of incarceration, Des Pres consistently de-genders them, in fact, his extracts from survivor narrative show evidence of precisely the differences in gendered behaviour recorded in the previous chapter of this thesis. Behaviour largely absent from male narrative, such as care for fellow incarcerated, sharing of "organised" items *without* payment and gift-giving, is thus universalised, its gendered particularity passed over. Des Pres states that 'Help one another. Every man for himself' is the conflicted creed at the heart of survivor narrative (1976: 97), yet his methodology – essentially articulated in his assertion that 'Men and women... in sorrow's deepest moments... are one' (29) – prevents him from seeing this conflict as frequently reflecting the narrator's gender.

In contrast, recent work by women critics such as Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, Marlene Heinemann, Sara Horowitz and S. Lillian Kremer has begun to address this lacuna, identifying elements of narrative particular to women. For Ezrahi, women's narrative is characterised by its materiality (1982: 74) – what Lawrence L. Langer terms the "'creatureliness'" of incarceration<sup>2</sup>; 'life as painful physical sensation' from which 'it was not possible to escape into the realm of ideas' (1978: 202-3). Kremer (1999: 8) stresses the primacy of themes of bonding – with relatives or within created "camp families" (11, 18-19) – mutual assistance (17) and the adaptation of homemaking skills to improve day-to-day living conditions (16). These motifs, she finds, are largely absent from male narrative.

Can it be suggested at this stage that women's narrative employs a distinctive voice which not only describes the different horrors women endured but expresses the same hell in a different way?

Many critics have identified two quite distinct voices within Holocaust narrative. At one extreme, the narrator in Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* stresses individual qualities of inner spiritual resistance as a means of surviving atrocity. His survival is framed in the conventional autobiographical form of the *Bildungsroman*; incarceration is represented as meaningful to the extent that the survivor achieves some measure of personal growth. Marlene Heinemann terms this kind of narrative voice 'self-dramatizing'; it 'minimizes... vulnerability and idealizes... resistance' (1986: 45), characteristically emphasising 'individual initiative and responsibility as part of an autobiographical strategy' (47).

Primo Levi's narrative *If This Is A Man* is at the other extreme from Frankl's. This form, which Sara Horowitz (Baskin (ed.), 1994: 269) styles atrocity narrative, employs what Langer (1977: 82) and others refer to as an inversion of 'the traditional pattern of autobiography and *Bildungsroman*', effectively repudiating the notion of incarceration as a meaningful experience. Levi's narrative exemplifies that which Heinemann (1986: 47) terms 'self-effacing', employing 'stylistic techniques which convey victimization' and emphasising 'the body... [and] the evocation of suffering'.

This thesis will suggest that the self-dramatising voice is largely male. When it is heard in narratives such as Fania Fénelon's *The Musicians of Auschwitz*, its individualism is contained within its emphasis on community and relationship, which is generally absent from male narrative. Women's narrative is largely characterised by the self-effacing voice, exemplified by Charlotte Delbo in her work *Auschwitz and After*.

The self-dramatising voice can be identified with what Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson describe as 'the autobiographical "I" of the Western literary tradition,

a sign of the Enlightenment subject, unified, rational, coherent, autonomous, free, but also white, male, western. This subject has variously been called "the individual" or "the universal human subject" or "the transcendent subject" or "man". Cultural attachment to this sovereign "I" signals an investment in the subject of "history" and "progress," for this "man" is the subject who traveled across the globe, surveyed what he saw, claimed it, organized it, and thereby asserted his superiority over the less civilized "other" whom he denigrated, exploited, and "civilized" at once (1998: 27).

A further contention of this work, therefore, is that this self-dramatising "I" is clearly a problematic form adequately to contain the experience of incarceration as the Nazis' denigrated "Other", whether male or female. Only by inversion or reversal can this form accommodate the narrative of the 'colonised subject' (28). When this subject is a woman, Smith and Watson ask if she can indeed speak at all through the medium of a 'generic practice... complicit in the West's romance with individualism', given her double marginalisation within both colonial and patriarchal forms of discourse (28). In other words, how might a Jewish woman write of incarceration? This is the question the following chapter will attempt to answer.



'[I]n the Lager... everyone is desperately and ferociously alone' (Levi, 1987: 94). This contention embodies the most fundamental difference between male and female narrative. Male narrative in general – and self-effacing narrative in particular – echoes what Ezrahi, borrowing from Des Pres, terms this "'Darwinian'" perspective<sup>3</sup>. For Frankl, the fittest to survive is one who has upheld the morality enshrined in the model of heroic and redemptive suffering which, as Des Pres (1976: 42) argues, is the cornerstone of our culture. Levi, on the other hand, maintains that 'the worst survived, the selfish, the violent, the insensitive, the collaborators... the spies'. In Auschwitz 'The worst survived - that is, the fittest; the best all died' (1989: 63); 'the room for choices (especially moral choices) was reduced to zero' (33). Women represent themselves as struggling against this Darwinian individualism, not by moral strictures but practical measures. If Gisela Perl states that 'There was only one law in Auschwitz – the law of the jungle – the law of self-preservation' (1992: 75-6) her whole narrative, emphasising inter-relatedness and mutual aid, opposes it.

The work of the feminist writer Carol Gilligan suggests that these differing outlooks stem from gender acculturation. Men tend to view themselves as 'opponents in a contest of rights', women as 'members of a network of relationships on whose continuation they all depend' (1998: 30). Men aspire towards autonomy and individual achievement; 'concern with relationships appears as a weakness of women rather than as a human strength'<sup>4</sup>. Men privilege a more abstract view of social organisation, 'a morality of rights and noninterference'. Crucially for this work, Gilligan identifies within this view a 'potential justification of indifference and unconcern' (22). Women, conversely, 'reconstruct hypothetical dilemmas in terms of the real' (100-1); their 'moral imperative' appears to be 'a responsibility to discern and alleviate the "real and recognizable trouble" of this world' (100).

Gisela Brinker-Gabler and Sidonie Smith quote Wendy Brown as suggesting that this difference operates right up to the level of the state itself: "'its discursive currencies are rights rather than needs, individuals rather than relations, autogenesis rather than interdependence, interests rather than shared circumstances'"<sup>5</sup>. This accurately reflects the "state" of the Lager as represented in male narrative, whether self-effacing or self-dramatising. In this extreme locus, the masculine potential for indifference has become actualised.

Narrative expresses gendered difference. Deborah Tannen terms '*report-talk*' the male form of speech which '[exhibits] knowledge and skill... holding center stage through verbal performance such as story-telling, joking, or imparting information'. It is 'primarily a means to preserve independence and negotiate and maintain status in a hierarchical social order'. By contrast, women's '*rapport-talk*' constitutes 'a way of establishing connections and negotiating relationships' where 'Emphasis is placed on displaying similarities and matching experiences' (1992: 77).

Gilligan's work has been criticised for its 'essentializing and universalizing' of women's voices (Smith and Watson (eds.), 1998: 30). Yet the following passages, from Tadeusz Borowski's fictionalised memoir "Auschwitz, Our Home (A Letter)" and Delbo's *Auschwitz and After*, strongly support Gilligan's and Tannen's findings. Borowski's narrator greets a friend "'luckier'" than himself and picked for the *Sonderkommando*, 'which is certainly better than swinging a pickaxe on nothing but one bowl of soup a day' (1976: 141). He asks him:

'So you're still alive, Abbie? And what's new with you?'

'Not much. Just gassed up a Czech transport.'

'That I know. I mean personally?'

'Personally? What sort of "personally" is there for me? The oven, the barracks, back to the oven... Have I got anybody around here? Well, if you really want to know what "personally" – we've figured out a new way to burn people. Want to hear about it?' (142).

The understated, shorthand form of exchange constitutes an extreme form of report-talk. Precisely where the personal hell of *Sonderkommando* work is acknowledged and where the narrator invites his friend to gain some emotional relief, rapport is rejected in favour of report.

In Delbo's narrative, such emotional isolation is the terrifying exception to the norm. The narrator is left alone to finish levelling the bottom of a ditch:

They [her colleagues] leave waving a regretful farewell. They know the dread that fills us all when we find ourselves separated from the others, when we are left all alone...

Now that they have left I am desperate... No-one believes she will return [from Auschwitz] when she is alone.

When reunited with her colleagues they joke with her, make her exchange tools so that she has the lighter one, and finally conceal her until she can recover:

Lulu has a good look around us, and seeing there is no kapo in the vicinity, she takes hold of my wrist, and says, "Get behind me, so they can't see you. You'll be able to have a good cry." She speaks in a timid whisper. Probably this is just what I needed since I obey her gentle shove... I cry my eyes out. I did not wish to cry, but the tears well up and stream down my cheeks...

It is as though I had wept against my mother's breast (1995: 103-105).

Report-talk, Tannen claims, is 'in the broadest sense, "public speaking"' (77); women's speech represents a form of '*private speaking*' (76) which has traditionally been denigrated: 'Throughout history, women have been punished for talking too much *or in the wrong way*' (75, emphasis added).

While paying little regard to the implications of gender, Holocaust literary critics have for decades displayed anxieties about which of these voices, self-dramatising or self-effacing, to privilege. Earlier critics, Steiner and Halperin in particular, clearly value the self-dramatizing, enshrining as it does those traditional moral and religious ideals which they presume so universally understood that they require no elaboration. Langer, conversely, argues that viewing the Holocaust 'in the context of eternal verities like martyrdom, human dignity, or whatever rhetorical label we choose' can be regarded as 'a... form of avoidance' (1982: x).



We might turn to Adorno's early critical writings to help us more clearly to understand this critical divergence. In his 1949 essay "Cultural Criticism and Society" he outlines the critical approaches which he terms immanence and transcendence. Simon Jarvis summarises these. 'An immanent critique is one which "remains within" what it criticises. Whereas a "transcendent" critique, a critique from the outside, first establishes its own principles, and then uses them as a yardstick by which to criticise other theories, immanent critique... uses the internal contradictions of a body of work to criticise that work in its own terms' (1998: 6).

Steiner and Halperin might be termed transcendent critics, assuming a "commonsense" understanding and acceptance of 'the community of traditional values' (Steiner, 1985: 29) underpinning the Western literary tradition, and applying these to Holocaust narrative. These values Langer finds utterly redundant in evaluating atrocity narrative, privileging the very elitism he rejects specifically in the works of Frankl and Bruno Bettelheim. Steiner praises the 'controlled poetic mercy' of Bettelheim's 'factual analysis' (1985: 25) as Halperin does Frankl's 'spiritual resources' (1970: 25). Langer accuses Frankl and Bettelheim of '[dividing] their verbal energy between recapturing the truth and rescuing their image for themselves and for posterity' (1982: 6).

Young (1990: 190) suggests that primarily a critic must become aware of the 'figures of critical interpretation' which 'tend to whiten themselves out, leaving behind a palimpsest of naturalized historical and critical conclusions' – the unchallenged universal values which inform works such as Steiner's and Halperin's. Adorno identifies as transcendent such critical praxis, which 'sees itself obliged to fall back upon the idea of "naturalness", which in itself forms a central element of bourgeois ideology' (1995: 31). Immanent criticism on the other hand 'takes seriously the principle that it is not ideology in itself which is untrue but rather its pretension to correspond to reality' (32). Linda Hutcheon puts this another way. A 'postmodernist refocusing on historicity' exposes 'very self-reflexively' the 'myth- or illusion-making tendencies of historiography' (1995: 16). It 'suggests *no search for transcendent timeless meaning*' (19, emphasis added); it 'reveals rather than conceals the tracks of the signifying systems that constitute our world – that is, systems constructed by us in answer to our needs'. Crucially she argues that '*no* narrative can be a natural "master" narrative; there are no natural hierarchies; there are only those we construct' (13). Young articulates critical anxieties that such deconstructive strategies may reduce testimony to 'only a detached and free-floating sign' (1990: 24). For Hutcheon, these anxieties miss the point: 'in arguing that *history* does not exist except as text', such theory 'does not stupidly... deny that the *past* existed, but only that its accessibility to us now is entirely conditioned by textuality. We cannot know the past except through its texts: its documents, its evidence, even its eye-witness accounts are *texts*' (1995: 16).



This immanent approach – formulated by Adorno and applied by Young specifically to Holocaust narrative – would seem to be the most fruitful method by which to interrogate such narrative – male and female, self-dramatising and self-effacing – as well as the subsequent fictions, where male writers often represent women via naturalised gender stereotypes. Within women's fictions, these figures, what might be termed the "white mythologies" of male culture (see this chapter, note 21) – bearing no relation to real women, let alone women in the Holocaust – are often harshly challenged.

Women's Holocaust narratives offer a coded critique of transcendence. They expose the contradictions inherent in a regime fabricated out of ideologies *declared* transcendent: the forcible extracting of "subhuman" Jewish women's blood for German soldiers (Lengyel, 1995: 189; Ehrlich, Appendix IV: 43), the rewards given to "subhuman" Russian prisoners of war for raping German lesbian women (Plant, 1986: 115); the systematic dehumanisation of those *already* designated "subhuman" in order to facilitate mass extermination (Young, 1990: 93).

Marion Kaplan states that the Nazis 'essentially destroyed' Jewish patriarchal structures, 'leaving a void to be filled by women' (1998: 59). Women's fictions, Susan Fromberg Schaeffer's in particular, narrate the disintegration of patriarchal cultures reliant upon naturalised values – proclaimed transcendent – whether Jewish or German. Such narratives, accurately reflecting women's experiences of incarceration, expose the faultlines concealed within these cultures far more clearly than do those fictions – largely male – which, reduplicating transcendent ideologies, unwittingly affirm them.

## 2.2 A chronological overview

The following section comprises a review of the most significant and influential material by critics in this field. It will trace patterns of thought from the late 1940s to the present day, examining in detail the central divergence between critics who, like Steiner and Halperin, privilege traditional forms of narrative – broadly, the *Bildungsroman* form with its enshrined transcendent values – and those such as Langer and Young who challenge this form, albeit from different perspectives. Finally it will examine recent works by women who focus on the gendered divergence between male and female writers, suggesting that there is a clearly identifiable voice within women's narrative which represents the different horrors they suffered.

### 2.3. 1949 to 1966: Theodor Adorno and George Steiner's ethics of Holocaust art

Ernst Van Alphen states that discussions of Holocaust art cannot avoid making reference to 'Adorno's famous dictum' (1997: 17). Yet Adorno's 1949 essay actually focuses on culture in crisis and the decayed state of cultural criticism. Auschwitz is first mentioned in his last paragraph. Here, Adorno warns that the 'Absolute reification' which threatens to 'absorb the [critical] mind entirely' in the post-Auschwitz era precludes understanding of *why* it has become 'impossible to write poetry today' (Adorno, 1995: 34).

Michael Rothberg acknowledges that while 'Adorno is very much responsible for the centrality that Auschwitz has had in academic and popular discourses' his "'after Auschwitz" proposition' has, in a variety of disciplines, been 'as often misquoted' as quoted: 'Few of Adorno's commentators who have picked up on his Auschwitz hypothesis have been interested in his system of thinking as a whole; rather, they have been concerned with the implications of the proposition for the study of some aspect of culture in the light of the Nazi genocide'. Consequently, 'As a two-word sound bite, "After Auschwitz" has become the intellectual equivalent of the political poster slogan "Never Again!"'<sup>6</sup>.

Adorno in later works refines his contention. In "Commitment" (1962) he argues that the act of transforming genocide into art runs the risk of creating what he terms 'a dreary metaphysics that affirms the horror', presenting a redemptive view of 'humanity blossoming in so-called extreme situations' (1992: 88). For this reason, he stresses that 'I do not want to soften my statement that it is barbaric to continue to write poetry after Auschwitz' (1992: 87). In "Is Art Lighthearted?" (1967), where he argues that art by its very nature cannot avoid being 'a source of pleasure' (1992: 248), he acknowledges that 'The statement that it is not possible to write poetry after Auschwitz does not hold absolutely, but it is certain that after Auschwitz, because Auschwitz was possible and remains possible for the foreseeable future, lighthearted art is no longer conceivable' (251).

Finally, he refutes it. In his 1966 essay "Meditations on Metaphysics" Adorno acknowledges that "Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream; hence it might have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems' (1973: 362). In 1962 he had argued similarly that 'suffering... demands the continued existence of the very art it forbids; hardly anywhere else does suffering still find its own voice' (1992: 88). Adorno does not, as Elie Pfefferkorn contends, simply make a 'recantation' of his original contention<sup>7</sup> but rather a reappraisal of it. Adorno's underlying concern has remained that art, because its essential function is to provide enjoyment, always contains the possibility of transforming genocide into pleasure (1992: 88). When he claims that this danger is intensified by art's being 'taken in hand by the culture industry and placed among the consumer goods' (1992: 251) he appears to foresee what historian Tim Cole terms "'Shoah business'" (1999:1); the 'transformation of "Europe's most searing genocide... into an American version of kitsch"'<sup>8</sup>.



As Geoffrey Hartman argues, Adorno's contention 'was intended to be, as the context shows, a caution against the media and any aesthetic exploitation' (1995 (ed.): 19).

Adorno sums up his reservations about Holocaust art in 1966: 'After Auschwitz our feelings resist any claim of the positivity of existence as sanctimonious, as wronging the victims; they balk at squeezing any kind of sense, however bleached, out of the victims' fate' (1973: 361). His division of duration into pre- and post-Auschwitz articulates a recurrent critical theme, that the Holocaust effected a profound cultural rift. Dominick LaCapra argues that it 'functions as a more or less covert point of rupture between the modern and the postmodern' (1994: xi). This belief informs George Steiner's essays on the Holocaust published in *Language and Silence* (1967). Claiming that 'What man has inflicted on man... has affected the writer's primary material – the sum and potential of human behaviour', Steiner sites the Holocaust at the epicentre of 'the extermination by hunger or violence of some 70 million men, women and children in Europe and Russia between 1914 and 1945'. As a result, he states, 'We come *after*, and that is the nerve of our condition. After the unprecedented ruin of humane values and hopes by the political bestiality of our age'<sup>9</sup>.

In essence, Steiner argues that 'the community of traditional values' has been 'splintered' and 'words themselves... twisted and cheapened'<sup>10</sup> by this 'political inhumanity... and certain elements in the technological mass-society which has followed on the erosion of European *Bourgeois* values'. Literary silence may be preferable to attempts to develop an 'idiom representative of the general crisis'<sup>11</sup>. Literature, which was supposed to 'enrich not only taste [and] style but moral feeling... cultivate human judgment and act against barbarism'<sup>12</sup>, has been shown to have failed in this task. The Nazis who 'devised and administered Auschwitz' had been 'trained to read Shakespeare and Goethe, and continued to do so'<sup>13</sup>. He finds no evidence that 'the humanities humanise'<sup>14</sup>. Like Adorno, Steiner fears that the 'intricate modulations' of literary representation may dilute atrocity: 'The aesthetic makes endurable'<sup>15</sup>.

Steiner's transcendence is made manifest in his claim that 'plainly, the critic has special responsibilities towards the art of his own age. He must ask of it... what it contributes to or detracts from the dwindled reserves of moral intelligence. What is the measure of man this work proposes?'<sup>16</sup>. This mysterious quality is largely inaccessible to common understanding: 'What save half-truths, gross simplifications, or trivia, can, in fact, be communicated to that semi-literate mass audience which popular democracy has summoned to the marketplace? Only in a diminished or corrupted language can most such communication be made effective'<sup>17</sup>. His claim that atrocity alone has diminished the possibilities of literature is inevitably contaminated by such cultural elitism as this. Critics have declared Steiner's work marred by the subjectivity of such assertions masquerading as transcendent truth. For Nathan Scott Jr., '[Steiner's] hermeneutic... never ceases to insist upon the ultimately religious import of literary art'; therefore it 'never quite manages to be more than a matter of sheer assertion' and 'personal

testimony' (Scott in Scott and Sharp (eds.), 1994: 11). For Robert Boyers, Steiner's work can scarcely be judged to be of 'enduring value or even of serious ephemeral interest' because his style of cultural criticism is popular: 'Adorno might well see... nothing more than Steiner's success in making himself a spokesman for the culture industry and brilliantly reproducing the cultural values of a dominant elite' (Boyers in Scott and Sharp (eds.), 21). Steiner's stance positions him as part of the 'neoconservative revival that has placed the blame for contemporary problems on education and educators... and has seen the return to "great books" as the true path to salvation' (LaCapra, 1994: 19).

#### 2.4. The 1970s. Irving Halperin's will to meaning

Terming Holocaust narrative 'unbearably depressing', Irving Halperin in his 1970 work *Messengers From the Dead: Literature of the Holocaust* asks plaintively: 'are there any places in it that "lift up" the reader?' (25). For him, the 'dark moments' in Holocaust literature 'do not tell the whole story' (107). He identifies two 'essential points of view' (24), despair and meaning. The despairing narrator '[avers] that there was no such thing as "transcending" one's suffering in the camps'. Yet there are 'survivor-writers who believe that many of the oppressed in the camps were ennobled by their suffering' (25). Of what he terms 'spiritual resistance literature' (112), Frankl's *Man's Search For Meaning* is his prime example. He 'sought to instill in [his fellow incarcerated] a justification, a moral sanction for attempting to live through their unbearable circumstances... to be... worthy of their suffering' (25-6). The work '[points] up the spiritual resources of some remarkable human beings' (25).

The term transcendence in Halperin's work is used to signify both the transmuting of personal suffering into spiritual growth and the moral and religious code by which the narrator comprehends and represents his experience. As with Steiner, this code operates as the "white mythology" by which Halperin privileges works 'containing the theme of spiritual resistance'; these are 'not nihilistic in tone or perspective; they... do not portray atrocities in order to shock the reader' (108).

Predictably, Levi's narrative is judged 'Almost at the poles from Frankl's affirmative, will-to-meaning perspective' (32). Here, 'the suffering of the prisoners did not make for saints; brutalized, starving men compromised their usual moral principles for the sake of a piece of bread' (34). Only Borowski is dealt with more harshly: he 'eschews rendering even a semblance of the compassionate relationships among the oppressed that are numerous recorded in the literature of spiritual resistance' (112).



In privileging will-to-meaning narrative, with its conformity to traditional literary expectations, Halperin does not appear to see the incongruity of representing genocide as a 'spiritual test', in which dissociation from physical suffering – regarded by psychologists (Leach, 1994: 25, de Zulueta, 1994: 164) as an automatic defence against trauma – figures as 'an extraordinary expression of spiritual freedom' (31). In Frankl's narrative, the autobiographical form, which Julia Watson and Sidonie Smith define as the 'privatized itinerary, the journey towards something, the personal struggle toward God' (1992: xx) serves to reduce genocide to an individual endurance test. Halperin does not suggest that Frankl's form may be utterly at variance with its content.

When Watson and Smith suggest that the act of writing autobiography is 'partially to enter into the contractual domain of universal "Man"' (xix), they expose a central contradiction within traditional Western autobiography. This form 'rests upon the shared belief in a commonsense identification of one individual with another'; all individuals are 'potentially interesting autobiographers'. Yet simultaneously as 'Western eyes see Man as a unique individual rather than a member of a collectivity, of race or nation, of sex or sexual preference, Western eyes see the colonized as an amorphous, generalized collectivity' (xvii). In accounts such as Frankl's and Bettelheim's the narrator represents Man the objective observer; his fellow incarcerated figure as the wordless "other"; colonized within these narratives they '[disappear] into an anonymous, opaque collectivity of undifferentiated bodies' (xvii). The inauthenticity of this autobiographical stance within Holocaust narrative is obvious. For the Nazis, the true colonisers, Frankl and Bettelheim themselves would be indistinguishable from this mass, none of them worthy to be called Man. Yet autobiography, Watson and Smith believe, can also become the site of a struggle against 'coercive calls to a "universal humanity"'; it possesses 'the potential to celebrate through countervailing another way of seeing, one unsanctioned, even unsuspected, in the dominant cultural surround' (xx). In these terms, Levi and Borowski speak on behalf of this mass to which Frankl, Bettelheim and the Nazis deny a voice.

Halperin himself is forced to concede that 'the center of Holocaust literature is not concerned with a few remarkable men who may have transcended their suffering but rather with the millions who were destroyed'. His persistence, then, in asserting that 'any balanced computation of the tragic facts must include recognition of some extraordinary ways in which the oppressed turned a human face to one another' (39) appears to confirm his bias towards the 'affirmative, will-to-meaning perspective' (32) of the conventional *Bildungsroman*. Considering the ratio within survivor narrative alone of prisoners who express despair to those who assign meaning to their suffering, Halperin's computation appears extremely *unbalanced*.

## 2.5 Lawrence L. Langer: from the 1970s to the 1990s

Halperin, then, valorises Man at the expense of *men*. Langer on the other hand dismisses Man as a pre-Holocaust construction whose narrative will not stand up to scrutiny as an authentic record of atrocity: 'Auschwitz... taught the abasement, not the infinitude of the private man, a doctrine departing so radically from our lingering heritage of romantic possibility that we resist its gloomy message as if our spiritual salvation depended on it' (1982: x-xi). For Langer the Holocaust is 'a saga without a controlling myth' (85). He suggests that the reluctance to abandon 'the heroic posture of much nineteenth-century romanticism' (1978: 20) centres on its substitution of 'the consolations of sentimental rhetoric for the challenge of genuine insight' (21). Elsewhere, he terms this rhetoric 'the terminology of transcendence' (1982: 38).

The works of Langer under consideration here span two decades. His earliest work to be considered, *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination* (1977) primarily engages with Adorno's claim that 'the so-called artistic rendering of... naked physical pain... contains, however distantly, the possibility that pleasure can be squeezed from it' (1992: 88). Langer, attempting to formulate 'however hesitantly... an aesthetics of atrocity' (1977: 22) focuses on how narrative might avoid the process by which 'the victims are turned into works of art, tossed out to be gobbled up by the world that did them in' (Adorno, 1992: 88). For Langer, Holocaust literature should aim

not [for] the transfiguration of empirical reality... but its *disfiguration*, the conscious and deliberate alienation of the reader's sensibilities from the world of the usual and familiar, with an accompanying infiltration into the world of the grotesque, the senseless, and the unimaginable, to such a degree that the possibility of aesthetic pleasure as Adorno conceives of it is intrinsically eliminated (2-3).

This infiltration is achieved by making the reader enter into an imaginative allegiance with the narrator until s/he is 'seduced into accepting the abnormal as normal, intellectually conscious of the atrocities in the background but emotionally relieved that they happen to "others" and not the characters we are concerned with' (90-1). The shock to the reader of recognising complicity in this imaginative normalisation of atrocity precludes pleasure. For Langer, Borowski's fiction succeeds where narratives which foreground atrocity alienate; Borowski embeds horror 'like chips of mosaic in a clay of commonplace behaviour' (89). Fiction stands more chance, he believes, of achieving such emotional seduction:

Most of the autobiographies concerned with *l'univers concentrationnaire* numb the consciousness without enlarging it... because the enormity of the atrocities they recount finally forces the reader to lose his orientation altogether and to feel as though he were wandering in a wilderness of evil totally divorced from any time and place he has ever known (75).

When Langer, however, cites Elie Wiesel's *Night* as a 'most impressive exception to this general rule' because of its 'compressed imaginative power and artful presentation' (75) he undermines his own distinction. It is 'ballasted with the freight of fiction: scenic organization, characterization through dialogue, periodic climaxes, elimination of superfluous or repetitive episodes'; its ability to arouse empathy is an 'elusive ideal' in a writer 'bound by fidelity to fact'



(88). The shakiness of his argument supports the contention of later critics that this distinction between autobiography and fiction is arbitrary. It seems that what Langer is articulating in this early work is the need for narrative to be anchored in the commonplace; writing in 1978, he adopts the term "creatureliness" to describe this groundedness.

In *The Age of Atrocity* (1978) Langer argues that 'fear of dying under conditions of atrocity' render the 'usual consolations of transcendence' extinct; they sound now 'like hopeless babbling' (45). Transcendence, however, dies hard: 'of the many illusions about human nature that history has peeled from the eyes of men in the twentieth century, the value of the heroic stance has been the last to go' (20). Representing atrocity is 'not a question of failed heroics but... *unavailable* heroics' (52). Ezrahi concurs; narratives of heroism are, for her, inappropriate both to the Holocaust and the Judaic culture (see this chapter, p. 36). Langer sums up the 'heroic stance' as 'a mutually reinforced collaboration between the ego and the outside world with language ... as the vital – indeed the essential – intermediary' (38). In *Versions of Survival: The Holocaust and the Human Spirit* (1982) he suggests that it is possible to 'distinguish between *visions* of deathcamp reality, limited only by the imagination of the narrator, and *versions*... determined by the personality of the author' (5, emphasis added), which strive, albeit unconsciously, to recover the narrator's own self-image. *Man's Search for Meaning* thus constitutes *version*: its 'real hero... is not man, but Viktor Frankl' (24).

Des Pres suggests that the concept of pure survival became culturally unpopular in the middle of the last century and has remained so. The 'Christian belief in salvation through pain... Kierkegaard's emphasis on despair and Nietzsche's on the abyss' all contribute, in his view, to the equating of suffering with 'moral stature... spiritual depth... refinement of perception and sensibility'; the more one suffers, '*the more one rises superior to others [and] the more authentic one becomes*' (1976: 42, emphasis added). Langer might well add that such a view of the Holocaust is particularly unrealistic: Frankl's 'barrage of platitudes' (20) derived from 'the vocabulary of Christian conversion' (18) serve to '[simplify] the threat of extermination into a conventional encounter between the free heroic spirit and human mortality' (18). Bettelheim – utilising Freudian narrative of the death instinct to explain passivity and non-resistance in the camps<sup>18</sup> – 'transforms Jewish genocide into a form of Jewish suicide' (44). The reality of 'Random brutal execution' reduces such theories, implying individual agency, to 'intellectual rubble' (45).

Other critics support this view. Alexander Donat claims that Bettelheim himself universalises his 'appalling... pseudo-scientific utterances' (Friedlander (ed.), 1976: 56) when he 'freely applies his experiences of the "extreme situations" in Dachau and Buchenwald in 1938 to the "extreme situations" in the Warsaw Ghetto, Maidanek and Auschwitz in 1943'. By comparison, the former were '*like summer resorts*' (57). Des Pres states that Bettelheim's 'psychoanalytic approach' is 'misleading', being 'essentially a theory of culture and man in the civilized state'

(1976: 155). Bettelheim's narrative, 'rooted in the old heroic ethic' (161), represents incarceration as a 'dramatic contrast' between 'the individual who possesses "autonomy", and the masses, who do not... a contrast between Bettelheim himself and "others"' (158). As Langer argues, '[reducing] the complex survival ordeal to a matter of inner strength... compels us to ignore the doom of those less fortunate, for to ascribe to the victims an inner weakness or an abandonment of values is to introduce an implicit reproach too infamous to consider' (1982: x). However, when Frederick J. Hoffman, for example, describes Bettelheim as 'a superior example of the person who had recourse to analyzing his situation *in order to survive it*' (1964: 278, emphasis added) we see how readily critics accept easy solutions to the complexity of narrating the Holocaust. Langer notes that Frankl's and Bettelheim's narratives have 'inspired and beguiled a generation of readers' (1982: 15). It is for this reason, perhaps, that Langer argues throughout *Versions of Survival* that 'the specific pains' of incarceration 'must be pluralized' (4), that 'the complexity of the ordeal' cannot be represented by 'eliminating private agonies and substituting a single historical fate' for "'the" survivor' (63).

### 2.5.1 Langer's refutation of gender

Langer, then, rejects categorically the notion of the "master" narrative. As Heinemann argues, however, both he and Des Pres 'quote from the memoirs of many woman and men but do not suggest anything distinct about male and female writing or experience'. This, she states, is 'standard practice in virtually all Holocaust scholarship today' ((1986: 4). Mary Lagerwey suggests that critics do not examine 'female or male Holocaust stories as gendered voices' (1998: 69) even though 'all Auschwitz stories are gendered' (73); 'female or male, purportedly objective or not, [they] are structured by gendered themes and relative positions of power and knowledge' (100).

In fact, in his 1998 essay "Gendered Suffering: Women in Holocaust Testimonies" Langer maintains that 'gendered behavior' played 'a severely diminished role... during those cruel years' (1998: 43). While women's communities 'may have sustained some' inmates (45), most still died. The survivors still suffer from traumatic memories which frustrate their attempts to reclaim normal lives: 'Even when we hear stories about mutual support among women in the camps, the context of the narratives shows us how seldom such alliances made any difference in the long-range effects of the ordeal for those who outlived it' (43).

This argument misses the point. One cannot surely deduce from statistics of mortality that gender played little or no role in women's experiences within the Holocaust itself, especially as elsewhere Langer concedes (1991: 9) that 'a recurrent theme' in oral testimonies is 'the mutuality that sustained sisters who went through the camp experience together'.



'[T]he survival of the few', Langer argues, 'cannot be used as a measure of why some women survived and others did not' (1998: 43). Yet one wonders whether Langer would deny Levi's and others' assertions that there *were* ways to improve one's chances of survival: for instance by obtaining some degree of privilege or protection – as did Frankl – or possessing a trade or profession useful to the SS (Levi, 1987: 95), an option unavailable to most women. Langer (1982: 61-2) maintains that survival was an incalculable matter; Joan Ringelheim agrees that 'Ultimately, survival was luck' (Rittner and Roth (eds.), 1993: 383). Yet, she suggests, 'that tells us very little if we want to find out about [women's] maintenance strategies and how these... relate to their survival. "Luck" does not tell us how they committed life in a world meant for death'.

Langer admits that differences exist between men's and women's testimonies. A recurrent women's theme is mourning for those supportive friends who died (1998: 44), a burden of grief additional to that for lost family, and one which few men's narratives acknowledge. Women also report the 'utter vulnerability' of nakedness and sexual threat, which was 'worse than the threat of death' (53); this theme appears to have no correlative within male testimony except that of homosexuals.

Crucially, 'One biological feature of their gender, the capacity to bear children, has had a singular impact on [women's] efforts to confront their ordeal, an impact that they could not and cannot share with male inmates' (46). When survivors describe how the birth of children after the Holocaust brought back traumatic memories of children – their own or others' – killed during incarceration, this too '*seems* specific to women' (46, emphasis added). While gender is a cultural construct, biology is innate; either women's biological experiences *are* specific to them or they are not. Each such point is made grudgingly, it seems. 'There may be a valid text about small communities of women who survived through mutual support or some strength of gender, but it exists within a darker subtext emerging in these testimonies' (48): the fact that women such as Perl, Lengyel and others killed newborn infants to save the mothers from gassing.

This is scarcely now "emerging" from shameful secrecy. Perl's 1948 and Lengyel's 1947 narratives are explicit. These acts of infanticide, heartbreaking for all the women concerned, are arguably the greatest acts of mutual support. Perl states that 'No one will ever know what it meant to me to destroy these babies... I loved [them]... not as a doctor but as a mother and it was again and again my own child whom I killed to save the life of a woman'. (1992: 82)

Langer elsewhere recognises that the incarcerated forced to choose 'between one form of abnormal response and another' faces a "'choiceless choice'" (1982: 72). Yet when he comments upon a passage from Judith Sternberg Newman's narrative – where the woman who kills a child to save the mother is labelled a 'murderess' who has 'learned well from the SS' (1978: 43) – the woman becomes 'the "*agent*" of death, who *coolly* sacrifices one life to

preserve another' (1982: 73, emphasis added). Perhaps Langer had not read Sara Nomberg-Przytyk's account of how Dr. Josef Mengele justifies murdering mother and infant together: it would not be "humanitarian" to gas children without "permitting the mother to be there to witness the child's death" (1985: 69). Langer's and Mengele's arguments have in common a certain specious quality, an avoidance of attributing agency to those who alone possessed it, the SS themselves.

It is as if these women abortionists become, for Langer, exempt from understanding even within the extreme circumstances they faced because in some way they become unwomanly, *ungendered*: 'When the miracle of giving birth and killing in the same time became the rule rather than the exception for the actresses in this familiar drama, events beyond their control mocked their efforts to create for themselves a gendered part' (1998: 49). Yet since this "drama" was never enacted within a men's camp it is perhaps the most gender-specific of any to be found in Holocaust narrative. 'To be sure', Langer admits, 'pregnancy and childbirth are biologically unique experiences'. He then warns against 'the danger of *overstating the importance of a biologically unique experience*' (56, emphasis added). How can one overemphasise what is unique? Could one, for example, overstate the importance of the "unique" experience of being designated Jewish in the Holocaust? This, after all, was not biologically inescapable, as the numbers of men and women hiding and "passing" confirm.

What constitutes women's greatest agony, Langer claims, is that they were forced to reject 'what *they regarded as one of their natural roles* as a result of their ordeals' (49, emphasis added). It seems rather that Langer is judging women no longer able to play a part deemed gender *appropriate*. His reaction emphasises, rather than diminishes, the importance of gender "white mythology". Would a male abortionist be deemed "unmanly"? Langer unconsciously demonstrates the strength such mythology possesses. It overrides even the consciousness he displays elsewhere in his writings, that atrocity invalidates moral judgements made in the name of belief-systems anterior to the Holocaust. In his earlier works when gender was not at issue, praise and blame were emphatically dismissed as reprehensible yet with regard to women's narrative Langer finds that 'In the dialogue between hope and despair... nothing remains to praise' (51).

He concludes: 'As for the ability to bear suffering... nothing could be crueler or more callous than the attempt to dredge up from this landscape of universal destruction a mythology of comparative endurance that awards favour to one group of individuals over another' (58). Langer's essay was reprinted in Ofer and Weitzman's anthology. Langer appears to suggest that a researcher such as Bondy, who in this same work claims that women possessed greater powers of endurance (1998: 319, 321, 323), is making such a judgement. Yet to Langer it does *not* appear callous to condemn women for failing to adhere to gender ideologies imposed upon them outside atrocity. Women who complied with ideologies of "good" motherhood perished in



the gas chambers, as Edith Baneth, Ester Brunstein and others attest. When Langer asks if we should celebrate the survival of a man who 'because he was a man, and able to work' (57) was selected to live, the question could equally be posed: should we negate the life of the woman who, because she was a woman, was gassed?

Perhaps Langer's notion of gender should be interrogated. A 'delicate balance' exists 'between gender and human identity' while between 'personal and cultural origins of the self' is 'tension' (54-5). Here, he seems to posit a closer, more harmonious relationship between gender and identity than between culture and identity, as if gender bears some affinity to biology rather than being itself a cultural construct. This idea – fostered by culture as a whole – underlies his essay. As we will see in the chapter following, women carried into the Holocaust this deeply ingrained idea that their femininity constituted their identity, and it is precisely through this identification that they suffered. Men represent themselves as being *dehumanised* by the Nazis; women as being *defeminised*. The trauma of this stripping of *gendered* identity seems to have no correlative in male testimony.

## 2.6 1980: Alvin H. Rosenfeld: Holocaust literature as an isolated form

Alvin Rosenfeld, like Steiner, argues that 'we must accept as a given the proposition that the Holocaust was something new in the world, without likeness or kind' (1988: 21). In *A Double Dying: Reflections on Holocaust Literature* he stresses that 'The human imagination after Auschwitz is simply not the same as it was before' (13), citing Wiesel's contention that 'At Auschwitz not only man died, but also the idea of man' (1982: 190). For him, it follows logically that Holocaust literature is a genre in isolation:

there are no metaphors for Auschwitz, just as Auschwitz is not a metaphor for anything else... the flames were real flames, the ashes only ashes, the smoke always and only smoke. If one wants "meaning" out of that, it can only be this: at Auschwitz humanity incinerated its own heart ... the burnings do not lend themselves to metaphor, simile, or symbol – to likeness or association with anything else. They can only "be" or "mean" what they in fact were: the death of the Jews (27).

This argument, with its inherent contradiction, inadvertently supports Young's: 'Rosenfeld necessarily figures events ("humanity incinerated its own heart"), thereby suggesting a meaning in the death of the Jews' (1990: 90). As Jonathan Culler suggests, metaphor may be inescapable: 'to use language at all is to treat something as a member of a class'. A non-metaphoric language 'would consist of logically proper names only' (1983: 202). To 'call something by a name in a natural language is to ascribe to it some properties'; thus, 'as soon as we speak, we engage in metaphor' (202-3).

Contradictions likewise occur when Rosenfeld attempts to justify his isolation of Holocaust literature. His assertion that much of Holocaust writing 'finally refutes and rejects' such 'direct

literary antecedents' as the *Bildungsroman* is followed by an admission that such writing 'necessarily [depends] upon the traditional means of memoir, autobiography, and *Bildungsroman*' (29) in order to become its inverse, 'a narrative of *miseducation*... an unlearning' (57) which 'rewinds the progress of growth backwards – from life toward death' (29). A common element in Holocaust narrative, he admits, is this 'profoundly revisionary way' of 'turning earlier literary models against themselves' and in the process 'overturning the reigning conceptions of man and his world' enshrined in these (31).

Rosenfeld specifically denies the Gothic as an antecedent form: the 'props and atmospherics of the Gothic romance or the early symbolist fiction' prevent a reader confusing these "'dream [kingdoms]'" with reality: 'In short, we pretty well know how to read [them]' (23). Yet there are recognisable elements of Gothic in Holocaust narrative. Rosenfeld himself states that the Holocaust's 'locus' is 'an extreme disjunction between familiar or remote and uncanny situations' (71). Fred Botting defines the terrain of the Gothic novel in a startlingly similar way. Gothic narratives are 'counter-narratives' which 'shadow the progress of modernity', displaying 'the underside of enlightenment and humanist values'. They '[condense] the many perceived threats to these values, threats associated with supernatural and natural forces, imaginative excesses and delusions, religious and human evil, social transgression, mental disintegration and spiritual corruption'. Gothic writing is 'fascinated by objects and practices that are constructed as negative, irrational, immoral and fantastic'. One may object that while Gothic narrative chooses to be fascinated by 'evil nature' (Botting, 1996: 2) such preoccupations are forced on Holocaust narrative by history itself, yet as *narratives* they bear important affinities.

Rosenfeld further undermines his case when he views Franz Kafka's short fiction *In the Penal Colony* as 'an uncanny prefiguration of Holocaust literature, a premonitory text' (1980: 23). No reader, he states, would confuse Kafka's 'infernal torture machine' with 'the actual machinery of Auschwitz and Treblinka' (23-4) yet Rosenfeld himself suggests such crossovers. Of the bone-crushing device in Leon Wells' memoir *The Janowska Road* he states that 'one finds such machines... in Poe and in Kafka, and any number of variations of them in gothic or horror narratives. They belong to the literature of terror' (63). Documents describing machinery designed specifically for the Auschwitz crematoria, written by the designers themselves, reinforce this impression of Auschwitz as Gothic locus<sup>19</sup>. The chain of cross-fertilisation extends beyond Kafka; as Rosenfeld acknowledges a continuum between Kafka and Holocaust narrative, so Ernest Pawel locates *In the Penal Colony* partly in literary antecedent and partly in Kafka's own fears about the events of his time<sup>20</sup>. Similarly, when Rosenfeld states that 'no reader of "The Metamorphosis" would accept Gregor Samsa's transformation into a giant insect as a change that could ever actually overtake him', we are reminded by Young (1990: 93) that the Jews gassed with Zyklon B, an insecticide, had previously undergone many years of ideological metamorphosis into vermin. For Young, it is not that within Holocaust narrative the



possibilities of metaphor are lost but that within the Holocaust itself, 'the distinction between figurative and literal language was lost' (93). Rosenfeld himself acknowledges that a characteristic of the Nazi era was the literalisation of metaphors of suffering – pouring salt into the raw wounds of incarcerated serves as one example (1998: 134-5).

Attentiveness to these intertextualities in fact serves to quicken critical awareness of less legitimate literary cross-fertilisations. As Horowitz argues (Ofer and Weitzman (eds.) 1998: 367), 'In many Holocaust narratives by men, women are portrayed as peripheral, helpless, and fragile; as morally deficient; or as erotic in their victimization'. Little or nothing in women's testimonies suggests that representations of women such as William Styron's are justified. Rosenfeld deals in some depth with Styron's Sophie Zawistowska; she 'represents, in her abused and broken body, the desirability of the Mutilated Woman', a 'new and singularly perverse type of sex object that is beginning to emerge in the writings of certain authors drawn to the most unseemly side of the Holocaust' (164). Rosenfeld's isolation of Holocaust narrative precedent prevents him from recognising this as a typical literary stereotype from Gothic narrative.

Out of fifty-eight diaries, journals and memoirs cited in Rosenfeld's bibliography, twenty are by women (in terms of fiction, Rosenfeld cites sixty-five works, of which no more than ten are by women). Yet despite this comparatively high percentage (see chapter 4, p. 89), women's narrative does not feature in the body of his work and Sophie is the only literary representation to gain a mention. '[A]t this stage', Rosenfeld notes, 'there is no "canon"' (10) and 'just which writers should be given prominence in such a study as this' is 'still to be agreed on'. Yet 'canon and canonisation' may 'carry distinct political and ideological implications' (Wales, 1990: 55); canonisation is 'a historical process through which texts are made... to serve hegemonic interests' (LaCapra, 1994: 6). LaCapra argues that 'Until recently, texts of women and minorities have undergone [the] process of suppression or repression' inherent in canonisation, whereby 'certain counterhegemonic traditions are effaced from the historical record' (21). Rosenfeld's omission of women's narratives may simply reflect Holocaust scholarship at the time of writing; nevertheless it participates, however unconsciously, in this process.

## 2.7 1988: James E. Young: a critique of universalism

Langer (1982: xii) states that 'all telling modifies what is being told'. James E. Young, in *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation*, develops this argument: 'narrative testimony documents not the experiences it relates but rather the conceptual presuppositions through which the narrator has apprehended the experience' (1990: 37). The events of the Holocaust 'are not only shaped *post factum* in their narration,

but... they were initially determined as they unfolded by the schematic ways in which they were apprehended, expressed, and then acted upon' (5).

Recognition of the primary role culturally determined *perception* played in shaping both narrative and experience is crucial to the arguments put forward in this thesis. Young does not deal directly with the role of gender in structuring perception; yet it is 'one of the major axes of social control' (Ofer and Weitzman, 1998: 2). In Nazi Germany this may have been even more the case, Claudia Koonz believes: 'To a degree unique in Western history, Nazi doctrine created a society structured around "natural" biological poles. In addition to serving specific needs of the state, this radical division vindicated a more general and thoroughgoing biological *Weltanschauung* based on race and sex as the immutable categories of human nature' (1987: 5-6). Young's work suggests that there cannot be a universal, genderless narrative of incarceration; only a *style* of narrative which proclaims itself the bearer of universal truths.

Nor can criticism safely fall back on the transcendent assumptions which, Young argues, form a body of 'naturalized historical and critical conclusions' (190), termed "'white mythology"' by Jacques Derrida<sup>21</sup>. Young maintains that in formulating 'a critical metalanguage with which to interpret both events of the Holocaust and the literature in which events are subsumed' the only thing to 'transcend our projections of mind onto events' should be 'the awareness of these projections' (190).

Derrida contends that 'the white man takes his own mythology (that is, indo-European mythology), his *logos* – that is, the *mythos* of his idiom, for the universal form of that which it is still his inescapable desire to call Reason'<sup>22</sup>. Contemporary feminist critics challenge the gender bias which itself acts as a "white mythology" within such a definition. For Sara Ahmed, a 'critique of universalism' must begin by uncovering the 'subject' of universal theory: "'the ideal observer" is masculine, rational and disembodied... *abstracted* from the contingencies of the social, including the bodily realm, in order to fulfil the criteria of universality, which involves treating *like situations alike*' (1998: 52). Susan Bordo borrows from Thomas Nagel the phrase 'the "view from nowhere"' to delineate 'philosophy... which has made an icon of the ideal of an abstract, universal reason... without race, class, gender, or history'<sup>23</sup>. As she argues, 'there *is* no view from nowhere... indeed the "view from nowhere" may *itself* be a male construction of the possibilities for knowledge' (137). Survivors in any case maintain that the Holocaust can only be viewed from a multiplicity of viewpoints; no prisoner's experience fitted exactly that of another<sup>24</sup>. As Levi states, while the desire to simplify Holocaust narrative is understandable, 'simplification... is a working hypothesis, useful so long as it is recognised as such and not mistaken for reality' (1989: 23).

Because it may be impossible to record history without recourse to 'the "metahistorical myths" that frame our discourse' Young questions the usefulness of the distinctions other critics



draw between historical narrative and fiction. 'In what way', he asks, 'do historians fictionalize and novelists historicize?' (1990: 6). '[H]ermeneutic distinctions between histories and fictions' are 'blurred still further' by the fact that 'contemporary forms of historical narration' have 'derived partly from the form of the English novel as it had developed by the nineteenth century' (7). Young quotes Robert Scholes: "'It is because reality [itself] cannot be recorded that realism is dead. All writing, all composition, is construction. We do not imitate the world, we construct versions of it. There is no mimesis, only *poesis*'"<sup>25</sup>. Literature, as Culler argues, 'forces one to face the problem of the indeterminacy of meaning'; it is 'a continual exploration of and reflection upon signification in all its forms: *an interpretation of experience*; a commentary on the validity of various ways of interpreting experience' (1983: 35, emphasis added).

Young maintains that 'the impulse to mythologise history and thus to naturalize and transform it' operates constantly; it is 'intrinsic to language itself' (67). However, Culler suggests that literature also possesses the means to explore 'the creative, revelatory, and *deceptive* powers of language' (1983: 35, emphasis added), acting as 'a critique of the codes and interpretive processes manifested in our languages and in previous literature' (35). A 'semiotic perspective' which acknowledges this can 'make explicit the implicit knowledge which enables people within a given society to understand one another's behavior'. He argues that 'Often, of course, this implicit knowledge is a deeply rooted set of cultural norms and conventions which operate subconsciously and which members of a culture might angrily deny' (32).

To consider all writing, regardless of its claims, first and foremost *as narrative* – as this thesis will do – is, Young believes, to liberate this 'valuable interpretive achievement' (17) of language in a way not open to the critic who insists that Holocaust narrative must 'literally deliver documentary evidence of specific events' and be 'received as testimonial proof of the events it embodies' (1990: 10).

Culler contends that once the subject is 'deprived of its status as *source and master of meaning*' it 'comes to seem more and more like a construct, 'a result of systems of conventions' which comprise it: 'Even the idea of personal identity emerges through the discourse of a culture' (33, emphasis added). Young argues that one can draw a distinction between narratives which are 'reflexively naturalised by a particular religious tradition or cultural continuum' – equating to Langer's *visions* – and those which employ a 'rhetoric of fact in order to naturalize, and thereby obscure, a particular subtext' (67) – Langer's *versions* of incarceration. In these, the culturally constructed nature of identity may be lost in the representation of the self as retaining its transcendent unity *in extremis*. Yet the cost is high. The narrative cannot then show the full extent of the Nazis' project to isolate and thus diminish and destroy the self, to deconstruct within the individual the moral and social systems which comprise the self. Many survivors suggest that this aim of actually destroying humanity within the prisoners governed many, if not all, aspects of their incarceration.

## 2. 8 1980: Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi and women's survival literature

In her 1980 work *By Words Alone: The Holocaust in Literature* Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi identifies a particular fictional space she terms "'survival literature'" (1982: 67), largely occupied by women.

Ezrahi terms 'ideological' the premise 'implicit in most documentary art' that 'reality must in the end yield a transcendent significance as part of a discernible historical process' (49). Because Holocaust narrative represents 'a unique kind of cultural discourse' (2) which cannot 'draw upon the timeless archetypes of human experience' (3), she criticises fiction which 'decorate[s] Holocaust history with a symmetry of heroes and villains' (69) in order to offer an 'unambiguously heroic reading of history... more palatable to popular sentiment which is a reservoir of faith in the triumph of courage over meekness' (35). Such writing frames Holocaust survival in terms of 'the heroic concept of human dignity as deriving from Roman rather than from Judaic (or Judeo-Christian) tradition'<sup>26</sup>. It tends to 'ignore or dismiss lightly the traditional response to collective catastrophe that constitutes the dominant resource on which the Eastern European Jew could draw in his hour of need' (34).

Ezrahi, like other critics, identifies two radically divergent voices within Holocaust narrative, terming them respectively, after Des Pres, 'the "human"' [and] the "'Darwinian" survivor'<sup>27</sup>. The "human" survivor's 'resistance to victimhood' is characterised by 'a strategy for personal survival' based on 'a code of morals'. However, since, as Ezrahi acknowledges, the inmate who tried to import the ethical and moral codes of normal life into the concentration camp 'would have been dead before nightfall'<sup>28</sup>, this narrative voice can be equated with Langer's *version*.

Conversely, Darwinian fiction can be seen as *vision*: 'that which stays so close to fact, which is so bound by the internal perspective of life in the lowest spheres, that all attempts to communicate with the uninitiated reader or to provide an escape route for the reader, or victim, into the verities of the past or the possibilities of the future are precluded' (8).

Arguably, neither of these distinctions accurately characterises women's narrative. What Ezrahi terms survival literature presents 'A different version and form of reality in... fiction in which the concentrationary experience emerges as provisional, and memories of a pre-Holocaust past and visions of a post-Holocaust future function as a promissory note to redeem the suffering of the present' (67).

Most of this fiction which '[dramatizes] the process by which civilized life had shrivelled to mere existence and was then pitifully resurrected out of the ashes' (67) is, she finds, written by women (67). It is 'predicated on the primacy of biological survival' (68). One of its 'basic premises' is 'the absence of a sense of any larger order to which the suffering of the individual can be related'; conscious of their utter abandonment, 'banished from the land of the living', the incarcerated 'has no external moral or social authority' to whom s/he must account (73).



The narrative 'usually begins in the time of preternatural quiet just before the German occupation' in order to establish 'the reality of the world which will furnish, during imprisonment, the material for memory and a vision of return' (74). There is a 'focus on *things*' which 'signifies a palpable foothold in a world from which the individual is about to be banished'; the 'self-indulgent young women who are the central protagonists in these novels' display 'an exaggerated preoccupation with the objects of this world' (74). The gradual loss of these objects mark the 'stations of [their] descent' (76) into atrocity.

Ezrahi describes these women as 'ingénues' who 'embody in the extreme the naive confidence in the perpetuation of present [pre-incarceration] reality, the lack of desire or ability to prepare for contingencies, and the utter disbelief in the face of the trials that await them' (74-5). Here, arguably, Ezrahi is both making too much of gender – utter disbelief in the face of Holocaust reality is expressed by survivors regardless of their gender – and too little. These women are anything but naïve in their swift realisation that 'Preservation of the spirit as well as the body is far more likely when the individual remains attached to a mutually sustaining group' (79, emphasis added) and in adapting their domestic skills to incarceration.

When they can be preserved, these attachments exact a high cost, Ezrahi argues: 'group survival' is often a 'fragile network' (70), altruism and self-sacrifice conflict with a desire for self-preservation. Deterioration of character is consonant with loss of identity (78); identity, as Karmel in particular demonstrates, often disintegrates with the failure of the group.

Here, fiction mirrors testimony. Women's identity, as the following chapter will demonstrate, is closely bound up with those closest to them. It is also tied to material signifiers of their femininity: hair, clothing, personal mementoes. Stripped of all these, the women's morale appears more fragile than men's. Hoess (1995: 134) notes that more than men, women – whether Jews or non-Jews – had 'very strong family feelings'; when a near relative died they would 'feel that their own lives are no longer worth living... not worth fighting for' (134). When women 'reached the bottom, they would let themselves go completely' (134-5), becoming 'stumbling corpses' (135). Rarely, in Ezrahi's view, do women become 'totally identified with [their] oppressor' (1982: 56) as men do in fictions such as Borowski's.

Regeneration/recovery is signified by the birth of a child within the camp (68); return of the menses symbolises 'a renewal of the life force' (71). Finally the survivor is liberated, but to 'the ruins of... former existence' (67). Arguably here, however, Ezrahi demonstrates a lack of gender awareness. Horowitz (Baskin (ed.) 1994: 269) argues that childbirth is a site of contested meaning; later scholars identify 'two distinct forms of narrative: those of atrocity and those of heroism'. In atrocity narrative 'pregnancy and motherhood render women especially vulnerable to Nazi brutality'; this 'conventional symbol' of 'hope and regeneration' becomes 'synonymous with death'. In narratives of heroism, 'Resistance finds concrete expression in... ensuring that



the pregnancy and later the baby remain undetected... and guaranteeing its safety' (269). The notion of women incarcerated possessing the agency to "guarantee" anything suggests some degree of inauthenticity inherent in this strain of narrative.

Memory in women's fiction serves both to structure narrative (81) and affirm normality in the face of atrocity, Ezrahi finds; it provides a 'safety valve from the pressure of present reality' (84). Women's testimonies examined in the chapter following confirm this. By contrast, memory is 'not functional for Darwinian, accommodational survival and... is seldom admitted' to the narrator's mind' (81). Levi concurs. He and his fellow Italian deportees discontinue their planned weekly meetings because the memories these aroused were too painful (1987: 43). In what Ezrahi terms the 'psychiatric literature' of Frankl, she believes that 'memory and fantasy' play a role in maintaining 'the "will-to-meaning" that can provide the strength to persevere' (81). Yet Frankl's relationship to memory and fantasy are arguably more complex. On arrival at Auschwitz Frankl asserts flatly that 'I struck out my whole former life', a mental act which 'marked the culminating point of the first phase of my psychological reaction' (1974: 12) and a kind of epiphanic realisation that it had no possible function within captivity.

A comparison of men's and women's narratives illustrate their divergent representations of memory. In Delbo's *Auschwitz and After* a group of women engaged in forced labour are allowed brief shelter from a downpour in a derelict house:

We stare at the house as though we had forgotten what a house is like, and we find a whole unused vocabulary. "This is a nice room" – "Yes, good light." – "The table must have stood there." – "Or the bed." – "No, this is a dining room. Look at the paper. There's still a scrap of wallpaper hanging there. If it were up to me, I'd put a sofa here, near the fireplace." – "Country-style drapes would look good. You know, a nice chintz."

The house bedecks itself with all its comfortable, familiar pieces of furniture, polished by time. Although it is now completely furnished, we are still adding small touches: "There should be a radio next to the sofa" – "They use storm windows here. You can grow succulent plants." – "Is this what you like? I prefer hyacinths"...

Our heat causes steam to rise from our damp clothing, a mist going up to the holes in the windows. The house has grown warm, lived in. We feel good (1995: 77-8).

Here, the remembered vocabulary "furnishes" a communal sanctuary in which all the women can revisit their pre-incarceration identities. The Nazis' project of dehumanisation has had a term set on it; it is seen as aberrant rather than normative. Delbo's writing exposes Nazism's faultlines: these women's "natural" instincts are shown as inimical to the very culture which actually valorises women in their domestic role as home-makers.

In contrast, Frankl's memories remain private: 'In my mind I took bus rides, unlocked the front door of my apartment, answered my telephone, switched on the electric lights' (1974: 38). His shared vision is presented as 'a kind of medical care of [the incarcerated's] souls' (81):

I spoke about the future. I said to the impartial the future must seem hopeless. I agreed that each of us could guess for himself how small were his chances of survival... I estimated my own chances at one in twenty... But I also told them that, in spite of this, I had no intention of losing hope and giving up...



I also mentioned the past; all its joys, and how its light shone even in the present darkness. Again I quoted a poet – to avoid sounding like a preacher myself – who had written... What you have experienced, no power on earth can take from you... Not only our experiences, but all we have done, whatever great thoughts we may have had, and all we have suffered, all this is not lost... Having been is also a kind of being, and perhaps the surest kind...

And finally I spoke of our sacrifice, which had meaning in every case. It was in the nature of this sacrifice that it should appear to be pointless in the normal world, the world of material success (Frankl, 1974: 82-3).

While Delbo's account is rich in concretisms, Frankl's is as full of abstractions. Because Delbo's friends communally "furnish" their house, all are "housed". Frankl's colleagues become a congregation in a house not even his: with his talk of sermons and souls it is God's, whose language is utterly incongruous in this locus. Past and future are shaped from others' words; his monologue permits no community of speech. More bizarrely, at the same time as he offers his audience an escape via transcendence, he binds them more surely to their sufferings; they cannot be free of them. Spiritual freedom thus amounts to a desire to be where the Nazis have placed them; the doctrine that suffering enlarges becomes here an insidious kind of collusion. The narrative's grasp on reality slackens still further when Frankl asserts that 'Once the meaning of suffering had been revealed to us, we refused to minimize or alleviate the camp's tortures by ignoring them or harboring false illusions and entertaining artificial optimism. Suffering had become a task on which we did not want to turn our backs' (78).

Frankl dismisses as particularly 'dangerous' the fantasies of food which many women share in their narratives: 'Is it not wrong to provoke the organism with such detailed and affective pictures of delicacies when it has somehow managed to adapt itself to extremely small rations and low calories?' (12). When on another occasion he admits that he is privileged in having the favour of at least one kapo who gives him extra food (24-6), his spiritual formulae appear reminiscent of the nineteenth century Mr Brocklehurst.

In women's narrative, Ezrahi could have found ample evidence that sharing memories and fantasies, such as Perl's game "I am a Lady"<sup>29</sup>, created bonds and raised morale; such fantasies are almost entirely absent from male narrative. The shared "cooking" fantasies in Gerald Jacobs' fictionalised narrative of the Auschwitz incarceration of Miklós Hammer (1995: 183, 199) – a work which in any case appears to contain historical inaccuracies – may be an exception to the rule so far as male narrative is concerned. More typical is Levi's experience:

[Sigi] talks endlessly about some marriage luncheon... everyone tells him to keep quiet, but within ten minutes Béla is describing his Hungarian countryside and the fields of maize and a recipe to make meat-pies with corncobs and lard and spices and...and he is cursed, sworn at (1987: 80).

## 2. 9 1986: Marlene E. Heinemann: gender as destiny

In *Gender and Destiny: Women Writers and the Holocaust* (1986) Marlene Heinemann suggests that 'it is obvious that those who deny a gender-specific Holocaust experience have not looked at the facts' (17). She identifies three themes in Holocaust literature specifically related to gender: the threat of rape and sexual abuse; the assault on women's fertility – 'a form of psychological assault on a woman's identity' (19) – and on their maternity, in particular the separation of mothers and daughters (23). These constitute 'an area of uniqueness to women' (34). Like Young, Heinemann finds that 'the dividing line between fiction and non-fiction is exceptionally difficult to draw in Holocaust literature'. An analysis which takes in 'both fictional and autobiographical texts' makes, she believes, for a more comprehensive study of the themes particular to women's narrative (8). Heinemann argues that 'two basic patterns' can be identified within women's narrative, 'stories of successful resistance against the enemy' or of 'inexplicable survival against great odds'. The 'self-dramatizing protagonist' emphasises 'the insignificance of suffering, the response of anger against the oppressor, the integrity of the person' (47) and 'the resistance to physical brutality' (45). In 'self-effacing' narrative emphasis is 'on the body... the evocation of suffering' (47). The 'tendency towards the egocentric memoir... seems more available to certain male writers than to women' (86); Fania Fénelon's 'quite egotistical' (88) style is tempered by 'evidence for a more communal pattern of relations' (89). For her, as for Langer, the resistance model, emphasising 'spiritual transcendence of suffering' (46), '[forfeits] some claims to credibility' because it 'idealizes... resistance to physical brutality' (45). It appears 'more artificial' (124). Yet because the study of Holocaust literature has 'focused primarily on the writings of men, whose perspectives have been taken as representative of the experience of all Holocaust victims' (2) the 'predominance' of a 'primarily egotistical battle for survival' is 'usually accepted' (5) while the 'importance of mutual assistance within the battle for survival' (5) is regarded ambiguously. Heinemann suggests that the emphasis on '[maximising] dignity and personal control over fate' may, by placing undue emphasis on 'individual initiative and responsibility' as 'part of an autobiographical strategy' (47) downplay the collective nature of resistance – arguably a central characteristic of women's narrative.

Heinemann outlines the characteristics of the self-effacing stance with reference to Delbo's narrative, with its emphasis on 'the body as the representative locus of the struggle for survival' (48). Delbo 'often includes herself only as an unnamed member of the mass of inmates, designated as "we"' (43); her personal story 'is often submerged within the collective, thus allowing her to reveal great suffering without drawing attention to herself' (48). Passages in the narrative emphasise 'both the subordination of the will to the body and that of the individual experience to that of the group' (49).

Interestingly, Heinemann suggests that narratives like Delbo's, produced relatively soon after the Holocaust, tend 'toward a group portrait'; these are 'more likely to follow a soberly



documentary strategy than a self-dramatizing pattern' (76). Estelle Jelinek finds this typical of women's autobiographical narrative: women 'write in a straightforward and objective manner' while men tend typically to 'the projection of a self-image of confidence, no matter what difficulties they may have encountered' (1980: 15). Heinemann finds Jelinek's distinction 'less valid' for Holocaust memoirs. Yet my examination of testimonies not intended primarily for publication but for documentation – produced later than, say, Fénelon's – supports Jelinek. Heinemann suggests in any case that difficulties exist in 'disentangling the writer's emotional venting from the actual possibilities existing during the period of persecution' (62-3); women's self-dramatising narrative can function as a vehicle for 'long suppressed anger' (62). We are returned to Langer's *vision/version*. Heinemann notes, too, that these protagonists tend, like Fénelon, to be privileged prisoners 'for whom survival is not *the* overwhelming struggle' (63); this, again, is untypical of the women whose testimonies form the subject of the next chapter.

Perhaps those accounts specifically aimed at publication after the sixties reflect the influence in the popular mind of John Hersey's and Jean-François Steiner's novels of heroic resistance which, Ezrahi argues, have been read as historical documents (1982: 35). Certainly Heinemann suggests that the 'human desire for a more heroic transcendence of adversity' may contribute to Fénelon's popularity, as could 'the need for female heroes by female readers' (1986: 133). Arguably there might be a sense in which later survivor narratives respond to, and refute, the drafting of female literary stereotypes into popular Holocaust fiction.

## 2.10 1999: S. Lillian Kremer: Gender Differences within Holocaust Narrative

Like Heinemann, Lillian Kremer in her critical study of women's fiction, *Women's Holocaust Writing: Memory and Imagination*, believes that the 'quintessential Holocaust texts... ignore the gender-specific experience of female prisoners' (4). This can be explained partially by the historical segregation of the sexes. Yet male authors also 'consign women to the margins of their imaginative writing' (3-4); in these, women often figure as 'helpless victims' (5). Literary critics follow historians in '[relegating] all but a small segment of women's Holocaust writing to the periphery, when not consigning it to invisibility' (4).

Women's fiction addresses this gender imbalance; women writers 'significantly extend literary representation and interpretation' (8) of the Holocaust:

Paralleling distinct patterns in women's Shoah testimony, women's fiction depicting individual and collective oppression differs from male presentations in its characteristic incorporation of uniquely female experiences such as menstruation, pregnancy, and invasive gynecological examinations; its inclusions of strategies women devised in their struggle to endure; and its descriptions of the ways women salvaged prewar paradigms of meaning in the face of annihilation (9).

Women's fiction also '[emphasises] misogyny as complementary to racism' (8).

Kremer's comparative examination of the points of divergence within male and female narrative, drawing on both testimony and fiction, is particularly useful to this work, allowing us to formulate a poetics of women's narrative. 'More often than does male fiction' Kremer claims, 'women's writing delineates the prewar period through graphic description of elegant, abundantly provisioned households' (8) to emphasise the 'violation of home and hearth at the core of Nazi criminality' (9). Male novelists 'follow the lead of ghetto chroniclers' whose focus on the communal life of the ghetto centres on its 'organizational structure and [the] dynamics of its administration'. Women, conversely, narrate 'family dynamics and valiant efforts to sustain familial structures' (9) from 'the vantage point of the individual' (9). Both men and women were stripped of their cultural roles and functions within the ghettos and the camps. Yet 'male narrators generally dwell on their loss of autonomy and its impact on their failure to provide for and protect their families' while women focus on 'the loss of family and secondarily the loss of autonomy' (8).

Male and female narratives of separation from parents or children are 'markedly different', Kremer finds (13). In male narrative 'The last view of children as they are marched away with their mothers at the camp railroad ramps is a recurrent scene or memory' (13). Levi's description of this parting is typical: 'in an instant, our women, our parents, our children disappeared. We saw them for a short while as an obscure mass at the other end of the platform, then we saw nothing more' (1987: 26). Women 'develop the ramifications of separation of parent and child at considerable length and in depth' (Kremer, 1999: 13). Wiesel (1981: 40) deals with the parting from his mother and sister in a couple of sentences, as does Miklos Nyiszli (1993: 19). Male narrative replicates this physical absence by narrative absence: the loss is itself lost in reportage on the events of incarceration. Referring again to his mother at the end of his narrative Wiesel states that 'I no longer thought of my father or my mother' (1981: 124). Mourning for lost family is a predominant and sustained theme throughout women's narratives, permeating the woman's life even decades after the event.

While for both sexes initiation is figured as 'the most dehumanizing' experience, 'Men typically write of this experience in terms of loss of autonomy and personal dignity'. Tattooing is 'emblematic of their characters' vulnerability and impotence' (10). Frankl and Levi, whose views of incarceration are otherwise almost diametrically opposed, agree here. After the shaving of head and body hair Frankl and his colleagues 'hardly recognized each other; but with great relief some people noted that real water was dripping from the [shower] sprays' (1974: 13). All this process signifies to Frankl is that 'we had nothing to lose except our so ridiculous naked lives... we all tried very hard to make fun, both about ourselves and each other' (14). Levi is similarly dismissive: 'what comic faces we have without hair!' (1987: 29). Hair and clothes are figured as *possessions*, not signifiers of identity: 'Nothing belongs to us any more; they have



taken away our clothes, our shoes, even our hair' (33). Tattooing is for Levi 'the real, true initiation' (33); it takes 'many days' before he can mentally adjust: 'the habits of freedom' still lead him to look at his wrist for his watch, not the number which now signifies his identity (34).

Conversely, women, 'socialized by religious teaching and communal values to be modest' narrate the initiation process as 'a sexual assault during which they were shamed and terrified by SS men who made lewd remarks and obscene suggestions and poked, pinched and mauled them in the course of delousing procedures and searches for hidden valuables in oral, rectal and vaginal cavities' (Kremer, 1999: 10). As Perl states, 'In a few short minutes modesty, which had been drilled into us by generations of parents and educators, became a thing of the past' (1992: 43). Almost without exception women recognise this induction as an assault on their femininity and particularly on the cultural signifiers of their gender: orthodox Jewish married women had their heads uncovered, unmarried girls were shaved as if they were matrons (Gelissen, 1995: 164, 63). Shaving represents the loss of 'the last vestiges of our feminine pride' (Sternberg Newman, 1978: 17). The tattooing almost passes unnoticed; Kremer finds that 'the humiliation associated with shorn hair and exchange of personal clothing for intentionally ill-fitting, mismatched camp garb' (1999: 10) is far more damaging.

As the next chapter will show, often these narratives feature a disturbing shift of perspective as women re-evaluate themselves via the male gaze. For women, being unable temporarily to recognise loved ones is particularly distressing: 'When response to names comes forth from completely transformed bodies, recognition is loud, hysterical. Wild, noisy embraces. Shrieking, screaming disbelief. Some girls bury their faces in their palms and howl, rolling on the ground' (Bitton Jackson, 1994: 79).

Kremer finds that 'Vulnerability borne of racism and sexism violently and relentlessly complicated the lives of Jewish women' (1999: 11). In women's narrative physical deterioration possesses a double significance: the threat of selection for gassing and the loss – feared permanent – of all that is feminine. Their anxieties constantly focus on the loss of menstruation and fertility, the 'fear of sterilization, forced abortions, and arid breasts' (10). Men's narratives, conversely, 'do not direct attention to the aesthetic and procreational anxieties of their physical deterioration' (11).

Often women's bodies became contradictory and confusing signifiers whose meaning was removed from their control. In Perl's memoir 'laughing SS guards... showed their appreciation of some of the beautiful bodies by slashing them with whips' (30). Fénelon describes how a thousand naked women underwent selection according to the state of their breasts; an SS officer 'lifted their breasts with the tip of his whip. Those whose breasts sagged went to the left, those whose breasts remained firm... were spared' (1977: 158). The female SS guard Irma Graese, according to Perl, masturbated to orgasm while watching Perl operate on a woman's

infected breast, cut open by a whip: 'From that day on she... picked out the most beautiful young women and slashed their breasts open with the braided wire end of her whip. Subsequently those breasts got infected... They had to be cut open, if the patient was to be saved... Irma Greze invariably arrived to watch the operation... giving herself completely to the orgasmic spasms which shook her entire body' (1992: 62).

Claims that 'one of the characteristics of Holocaust writings at their most authentic is that they are peculiarly and predominantly sexless' (Rosenfeld, 1988: 164) have been examined in chapter 1, p. 9. Women's narratives challenge this. A woman interviewed by Ringelheim remembers what happened in a camp near Majdanek when the male prisoners were one day allowed to go over to the women's camp: "'Strangest thing – so many of these men tried right away to screw... [They were] like a horde of animals... I had this vision for a long, long time – this horde of sick men jumping'" (Rittner and Roth (eds.) 1993: 377). While male rape or coercive sexual exchanges in return for favours is not reported by the majority of heterosexual male narrators – Roman Frister's is an exception (1999: 241) – women's narrative suggests that sexual exchanges, involving a degree of coercion, were customary where male incarcerated had access to women (Perl, 1992: 76, Lengyel, 1995: 61-3). Kremer finds that coercive sex and what she describes as 'rape by low-level functionaries' (1999: 11) – prisoner kapos – were often barely separable.

Judith Tydor Baumel finds a curious shift in women's narrative focus over the years. In the 1970s and 1980s memoirs 'strongly emphasised gender-related experiences' – a fact that may be explained by the emergence of feminism – yet these later narratives, while 'emotionally revealing', are 'characterized by a comparative degree of modesty in sexual matters'. In particular they were 'reticent about physical intimacy among women and matters concerning female sexuality'. In contrast, testimonies from the 1940s are 'often surprisingly revealing about such matters' (1998: 46). Interestingly, these early testimonies 'concentrated upon experiences which belonged solely to women's culture', a phenomenon 'highly unusual' at a time when 'it was uncommon to conceptualize gender'. Virtually all early memoirs 'emphasized the role of female self-help and mutual assistance in their authors' survival' (42). Ringelheim feels that 'Although there are many stories about sexual abuse, they are not easy to come by' (Rittner and Roth (eds.) 1993: 377). Often outright sexual abuse is represented euphemistically; becoming, for instance, a 'gynecological exam' (Gelissen, 1995: 64).

In the majority of women's narratives the fight against filth and disease is a primary theme; they battle with their appalling conditions by washing, mending and adapting clothing, by mutual delousing, nursing, "organising" or bargaining for extra food or drugs for sick friends or relatives. Such concerns are largely absent from male narratives. Some male writers speak of incarcerated retaining washing and grooming habits as a moral choice (Levi, 1987: 46) or to make a better impression with the SS (Glazar, 1999: 18). Women recognise that hygiene is vital



to try to stave off disease. Kremer finds that women 'often attribute their perceived lower mortality rate to greater ingenuity than men possessed in applying key domestic skills' (16). When they "organise" clothing and food it is as frequently for relatives and friends as themselves; Rena Kornreich Gelissen's memoir is particularly rich in examples of this.

There is little mention in such narratives of the hourly hazards Levi and other men recall: 'while one washes one's face, the bundle of clothes has to be held tightly between one's knees; in any other manner it will be stolen in that second' (1987: 40). Frister (1999: 241-2) admits to stealing another man's cap when his own was stolen, knowing the man would be shot (if discovered, Frister would have been lynched by his fellow-prisoners). In men's accounts theft from each others is commonplace, often punished by killing; in women's narratives theft from each other is rarer, and even more rarely brings down such an extreme retribution. As Kremer argues, 'female survivor reports and women's Holocaust fiction represent co-operation and bonding for mutual survival as the rule' (1999: 19). Bonding is the common denominator of women's narrative; comradeship within male narrative is figured as arising out of practicalities, and sticking strictly to these. While other factors – nationality, politics, religious observance – may create loose ties, emotion is rarely, if ever, expressed; the camp family is not a male institution. Ringelheim finds that 'Men, when they lost their role in the protection of their own families, seemed less able to transform this habit into the protection of others. Men did not remain or become fathers as readily as women became mothers or nurturers' (Rittner and Roth (eds.), 1993: 378). Thus, in women's narrative, 'the absence or presence of diminished fathers and praise for the resourcefulness of mothers' (Kremer, 1999: 12) is a significant theme. Instances such as Wiesel (1981: 112, 103, 117) reports, where sons abandon or kill their fathers, appear to have no parallels within women's narrative, where bonds appear generally to strengthen the more extreme the conditions.

Kremer also finds significant differences between men's and women's use of fantasy: while male characters 'remember enjoying fine meals' women re-enact communally the creation of meals; they 'fondly recollect meal preparation, and share remembered recipes' (1999: 15).

The last chapter concluded that gendered behaviour was carried over from prewar life into incarceration. These gendered norms subsequently structure survival narrative. 'Women's testimony and creative writing celebrates the formation and effective operation of female sustaining groups. Whether political, religious or merely circumstantial, whether a network of several or two persons, these women strove to mitigate the physical and emotional subjugation imposed by the Germans' (18). Male narrative reflects the fact that 'men... had typically been socialized to compete against one another'. While 'No doubt there were men who sacrificed themselves for one another... the preponderance of testimony and creative writing suggests such activity was minimal compared with that reported by women' (18).

The rule which informs male narratives is summarised by Levi:

If [someone] vacillates, he will find no one to extend a helping hand; on the contrary, someone will knock him aside, because it is in no one's interest that there will be one more 'musselman' dragging himself to work every day; and if someone, by a miracle of savage patience and cunning, finds a new method of avoiding the hardest work, a new art which yields him an ounce of bread, he will try to keep his method secret, and he will be esteemed and respected for this, and will derive from it an exclusive, personal benefit; he will become stronger and so will be feared, and who is feared is, ipso facto, a candidate for survival (1987: 94).

Until the relatively recent advent of women's Holocaust studies, history has in general come down on the side of this view. As will be seen in the following chapters, this résumé aims to cover the *major* disparities between men's and women's narratives. Many lesser differences and nuances will be revealed as some of the primary narrative sources are examined. That so many major disparities between women's and men's narrative can be identified when a study does pay attention to gender supports Kremer's and Heinemann's views that male criticism has so far stopped short of presenting the full picture.

## 2.11 In conclusion

This chapter records a central divergence between two views of the Holocaust. Either the retention of conventional ideologies of morality acted to transmute atrocity into individual growth or, conversely, these ideologies were utterly discredited. Over the decades criticism has gradually moved away from privileging the former to a realisation that both these represent narrative *styles* rather than necessarily describing lived experience.

Critics have employed various terms for these views: self-dramatising/self-effacing, heroism/atrocity, human/Darwinian. This thesis will primarily borrow Langer's terminology of *version/vision*, where *vision* is delimited chiefly by the narrator's facility with language and *version* is concerned first and foremost to represent incarceration in line with the individual's particular viewpoint. This thesis will also utilise Adorno's terms immanent/transcendent to convey the difference between narrative which strives to represent incarceration from within and that which seeks to organise it with reference to prior religious or moral ideologies.

It will not attempt to employ such dichotomies rigidly, bearing in mind LaCapra's warning against uncritical reliance on the 'extreme, all-or-nothing assumption' that in narrating the Holocaust there are 'essentially only two (impossible) options: totalizing, redemptive meaning (now seen as illusory if still alluring) and symptomatically staying within [the] trauma' by reproducing the 'fragmentation or fracturing of all possibilities of bonding or renewal' (1994: 195). LaCapra feels that Langer in particular, in attempting to redress the critical bias towards 'salvationist attempts to make us feel good' which represent incarceration as 'an uplifting



testimony to the heroic strength of the spirit', may have gone 'too far in the opposite yet complementary direction' (197). LaCapra is largely inattentive to possibilities of gendered divergence within narrative, and the consequent need for some means of identifying these differences.

Over the years mainstream critical thought has shifted its focus from universalising, ethical considerations to attempting to formulate a poetics of narrative which recognises the cultural diversity of voices within testimony. Only recently has it been suggested that a poetics of women's testimony can make a valuable contribution to this project.

The next chapter will seek to apply these findings to women's unpublished narratives.

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<sup>1</sup> Katz (1994 Vol I: 28) substantiates his claim with the following definition: 'The Holocaust is phenomenologically unique by virtue of the fact that never before has a state set out, as a matter of intentional principle and actualized policy, to annihilate physically every man, woman, and child belonging to a specific people'.

<sup>2</sup> Langer (1978: 47) borrows this term from Becker, E. *The Denial of Death*, The Free Press, New York, 1973, no page reference is given.

<sup>3</sup> Ezrahi (1982: 68) cites Des Pres, T. "The Survivor: On the Ethos of Survival in Extremity", *Encounter*, September 1971, pp. 6, 5.

<sup>4</sup> Gilligan (1993: 17) cites Miller, J. B. *Towards a New Psychology of Women*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1976, no page reference is given.

<sup>5</sup> Brinker-Gabler, G. and Smith, S. (eds.), 1997: 14) cite Brown, W. "Finding the Man in the State", *Feminist Studies* 18, Spring 1992, p. 20.

<sup>6</sup> See Rothberg, M. "After Adorno: Culture in the Wake of Catastrophe" in *New Germany Critique*, 1997, vol. 72, p. 46-8.

<sup>7</sup> Pfefferkorn states in his essay "Fractured Reality and Conventional Forms in Holocaust Literature" (*Modern Language Studies*, 1986 vol. 16 pt. 1, p. 98, n. 1) that 'in 1966 [Adorno] recanted his position' set out in "Cultural Criticism and Society". Pfefferkorn argues that 'had Langer known about Adorno's recantation, it might have modified his "aesthetics of atrocity" theory. At least his line of argument might have been different'.

<sup>8</sup> Cole (1999: 15) cites Miller, J. *One, by One, by One. Facing the Holocaust*, New York, 1990, p. 232.

<sup>9</sup> See Steiner, G. "Humane Literacy" in *Language and Silence*, Faber and Faber, 1985: pp. 22-3.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>11</sup> "Silence and the Poet", ibid. p. 69.

<sup>12</sup> "To Civilise Our Gentlemen", ibid., p. 77-8.

<sup>13</sup> "Humane Literacy, ibid. p. 23.

<sup>14</sup> "To Civilise our Gentlemen", ibid., p. 81.

<sup>15</sup> "Postscript", ibid., p. 191.

<sup>16</sup> "Humane Literacy", ibid., p. 28.

<sup>17</sup> "The Retreat from the Word", ibid., p. 45.

<sup>18</sup> Bettelheim (1987: 255-6) states that the failure of integration of the life and death instincts among 'immature' personalities led to 'infantile' thought-processes and failure among the prisoners to imagine death and prepare to resist it.

<sup>19</sup> Shirer (1964: 1155-6) quotes letters from firms such as I. A. Topf and Sons which describe the machinery they designed for the mass transfer of gassed bodies to the crematoria.



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<sup>20</sup> Pawel (1988: 327) states that the literary antecedents of *The Penal Colony* have been 'persuasively traced' to *Le Jardin des Supplices*, a 1899 novel by the French playwright Octave Mirbeau, which 'combines a sado-anarchist assault on bourgeois morals with explicit sexual imagery'. The narrators' 'strictly scientific curiosity precludes moral judgement or human emotions' as they 'investigate the exquisitely fiendish brutalities being perpetrated by ageing bureaucrats passionately devoted to the technology of torture and wholly oblivious to the humanity of their victims'. Pawel quotes a letter Kafka wrote to his publisher Kurt Wolff stating that the story "'is not alone in being distressing, but... our times in general, and my own time in particular, have been and continue to be equally distressing'".

<sup>21</sup> Young (1990: 190) cites Derrida, J. "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy" in *New Literary History* (6), 1974, p. 11, where Derrida identifies 'white mythology' as 'a metaphysics which has effaced in itself that fabulous scene which brought it into being, and which yet remains, active and stirring, inscribed in white ink, an invisible drawing covered over in the palimpsest'.

<sup>22</sup> Derrida, J. "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy" in *New Literary History* (6), 1974, p. 11.

<sup>23</sup> Bordo in her essay "'Feminism, Postmodernism, and Gender-Scepticism" in Nicholson, L. J. (ed.) *Feminism/Postmodernism*, Routledge, New York and London, 1990, p. 137, cites Nagel, T. *The View From Nowhere*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1986. No page reference is given.

<sup>24</sup> Langer (1982: 6) quotes Langbein, H. *Menschen in Auschwitz* (Europaverlag, Wien, 1972, p. 18, tr. L. L. Langer) who states that 'Each of us carries within him his own personally colored memory, each has experienced "his" Auschwitz'. Langbein (p. 37) in turn cites Bernard Kautsky, another Auschwitz survivor: "'Even when you're talking about the same period of time, prisoners in the same camp lived on different planets'".

<sup>25</sup> Young (1990: 17) cites Scholes, R. *Structural Fabulation*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, 1975, p. 7.

<sup>26</sup> Ezrahi (1982: 34) cites historian Salo Baron's essay "Newer Emphases in Jewish History" (in *History and Jewish Historians* (Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia, 1964, p. 96, 94) as the source of this insight.

<sup>27</sup> Ezrahi (1982: 68) cites Des Pres, T. "The Survivor: On the Ethos of Survival in Extremity" in *Encounter*, September 1971, pp. 6, 5.

<sup>28</sup> Ezrahi (1982: 68) cites as the source of this claim Lifton, R. J., *Death In Life: Survivors of Hiroshima* (Vintage, New York, 1967, p. 457), who in turn quotes Niederland, W. G., "Psychiatric Disorders among Persecution Victims" (in the *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, 139 (1964) p. 48).

<sup>29</sup> Perl (1992: 59-60) imagines for her barrack-mates a day in the life of a 'lady doctor in Hungary' who 'went shopping and lunching and walking, went to the theatre with [her] husband and son, had supper afterwards'. The game 'spread from block to block' in Auschwitz.

## Chapter 3

### WOMEN REMEMBER THE HOLOCAUST: A CONSIDERATION OF UNPUBLISHED TESTIMONIES

#### 3.1. Selection of material

This chapter deals with authentic and unmediated personal narratives of eight women who experienced ghettoisation and subsequent incarceration in Auschwitz and the forced-labour camps to which its inmates were sent, from 1939 until the liberation of Belsen in 1945. They were selected from the archival material held in the Imperial War Museum, London, and its Sound Archive.

Five – those of Edith Baneth, Ester Brunstein, Tauba Biber, Zdenka Ehrlich and Ryvka Salt – are transcripts of taped interviews held in the Sound Archive, made between 1985 and 1997. Hana-Maria Pravda's narrative of incarceration is transcribed from a taped interview made in 1985; her War Diary tells of her escape from a death march and existence until the end of the war. Shulamit Garbasz-Zimet wrote her account in 1995; Hertha Spier's testimony, written by herself, is undated. Tauba Biber has recently been reinterviewed for October Films.

The narrators here are from middle class backgrounds and were young during incarceration; Salt, the youngest, was twelve when her ghetto was liquidated. This limitation is imposed by history. Older women did not survive selections; the healthiest women at the beginning of the Holocaust stood the best chance of surviving to the end. Their cultural and family backgrounds vary from the strict Orthodoxy of Biber's family – in occupied Poland, her father had to be hidden each day in a coal bunker because his appearance would have given him away to the Nazis (Appendix II, 18) – to the passionate Czech patriotism of Ehrlich's father and Pravda herself. For Garbasz-Zimet, the trauma began as early as 1933, when she was four and her family fled Hitler's Germany for Holland. Some women grew up with antisemitism – Biber and Brunstein, both Polish – while others like Czechoslovakian Baneth experienced no antisemitism until the beginning of hostilities, her parents regarding themselves as both German and Jewish (Appendix I, 1). Pravda maintains that the imposition of German antisemitism made the Czechs more polite to her; a form of resistance to German occupation (Appendix VI, 93).



Their prewar cultural identities, therefore, are diverse. Yet as they move into the heart of the Holocaust, their representations of their survival become strikingly similar. Increasingly it can be seen that what links their narratives is a shared identity: they write as women. In this respect, their accounts are remarkably similar to the mass of published women's accounts of incarceration. Indeed, unpublished and published narratives alike suggest that not only did men and women suffer different horrors, but that women represent the same hells of induction, barrack life and forced labour in ways markedly different from men. The two key themes which connect these women's narratives to a remarkable degree also distinguish them from male narrative: the extent to which women represent personal identity as linked to their feminine identity, and how they represent their survival as a collective and mutual effort.

The first chapter of this study established the many ways in which incarceration differed historically for women. This chapter will interrogate the narrative strategies by which these women order their memories of incarceration. In particular it will focus on how gender informs the representation of the self and what constitutes feminine identity; how women narrate the loss of this identity; how they represent their survival in distinctively gendered terms; and the reconstruction of the self in the aftermath.

### 3.2. Theorising women's autobiography

This gendered difference in women's self-representation is not, then, due simply to the different treatment they received in the Holocaust. One of the most fascinating findings of this thesis is how women come to represent the same experiences in a way so different from men. One can say that the fictions to be examined later draw on the writings of feminists, as well as survivor testimony and, in Ilona Karmel's case, personal experience, in order consciously to refute the gender stereotypes which have adhered to women in Holocaust literature written by men. Yet these women's oral testimonies – the form that Langer and others regard as the least premeditated and "literary" (see this chapter, p. 57) – strikingly prefigure the work of Karmel and Susan Fromberg Schaeffer.

A brief examination of feminist theories of women's autobiography may at this point be helpful in answering the question why women survivors represent their experiences – including the same hells – so differently. They place gender at the centre of the debate, showing how women see and narrate themselves through the cultural lens which views women's life-writing as being of lesser value.

Linking the lack of critical attention traditionally paid to women's narrative to their cultural devaluation, these theories provide a context for suggesting that the marginalisation of women's narratives of incarceration simply follows this tradition. As Sidonie Smith argues,

The generic structures of literature and the languages of self-representation and examination constitutive of autobiography... rest on and reinscribe the ideology of gender. But that ideology and the stories perpetuating it have, until fairly recently, been created from phallogocentric discourses written... by men who serve themselves, constructing women symbolically as the mirror before which they can see themselves reflected (1987: 48).

Rachel Feldhay Brenner, considering specifically the diaries of four young women in the Holocaust, gives primacy to the role of gender: 'The story of the author's growth as a young woman or young man constitutes the core of autobiographical writing. The consciousness of female/male identity ineluctably affects the subject's self-perception, while consciousness of the surrounding world and its social structures shapes gender-oriented interaction with the environment' (1997: 147).

Theorists who address women's autobiographical practices challenge what Sidonie Smith terms the 'androcentric' (1987: 15) poetics of autobiography derived from the assumption that 'men's and women's ways of experiencing the world and the self and their relationship to language and to the institution of literature are identical' (14). They deconstruct such essentialising or universalising theories of gender, which have found particular acceptance within Holocaust research. For Felicity A. Nussbaum, Lacan's 'discourse of universal difference, of binary opposition that replicates a transhistorical heterosexual sex/gender system with its fixed hierarchies' cannot address 'the material conditions of oppression based on gender'. (Smith and Watson (eds.) 1998: 162). Shari Benstock argues that theories such as Georges Gusdorf's 'strikingly [recapitulate] the effects of Lacan's mirror stage' (1988: 14) while repressing awareness of the 'split in the subject' – the fissure between observed and observer – which 'language effects and cannot deny' (15).

Instead, theorists of women's autobiography turn to the works of Bakhtin and Althusser. Smith and Julia Watson, for example, draw on Bakhtin's theory of subjectivity as produced by a process of social interaction effected via dialogue; 'The individual's language is always language permeated by the voices of others, voices out of the sociocultural field'; thus the autobiographical utterance is 'irreducibly dialogic, contestatory; heteroglossic' (1998: 30). Furthermore, Smith suggests that a 'new concern for the graphia' (1987: 6), the competing significations within the text itself, challenges 'both... the concept of a speaking subject and... the belief in language's transparency'. It has 'shattered the epistemological certainties and ontological legitimacy of what French theorists call the "master narratives" of the West, autobiography among them' (5-6).



'[C]ultural mythmaking' is how Smith and Julia Watson (1992: xviii) term the 'post-Enlightenment' (xvii) construction within western autobiography of "'the straight white Christian man of property'"<sup>1</sup> whose power is sufficient to 'make *his* meaning stick (xvii). What is 'historical and transitory' appears as 'natural and eternal'; historical contingency is erased 'in service to a universalized humanism' of 'the Man without history' (xviii). In reality this "I" embodies the 'historical attitude' of the coloniser (1998: 27). Lacanian theory in any case renders this 'coherent, autonomous self... a fictive construct' (18-19). Yet 'The Lacanian "subject"', established through entering the 'symbolic realm of language... the Law of the Father', is masculine. In the process of entering language "'woman" becomes a reified cultural Other' to this 'phallic masculine Subject' (19). In Althusser's terms, the many cultural institutions which encourage the idea of the "'naturally" self-produced' individual (21) conceal the coercive measures deployed against her by the language system.

Equally, Smith and Watson argue that speaking of 'an "authentic" voice of some universal "woman"' is 'problematic' (31). Women's narratives are not necessarily reducible to the 'privatized itinerary, the journey towards something... the entry into society of the *Bildungsroman*', the mode which '[secures] the "individual" rather than the collective character of self-representation' (1992: xx). There exist 'other forms of life story telling, both oral and written' (xviii).

Historically, women have been 'the gathered, the colonized, the ruled', Susan Stanford Freidman argues (Smith and Watson (eds.) 1998: 79), particularly so if their race or religion also marginalises them. We might then suggest that while all Jews within the Holocaust were colonised, women suffered a double colonisation, within their own culture and again by the Nazis; this constitutes an important element of narrative difference.

The central Enlightenment 'concept of *Bildung*' which 'focused on the construct of the enlightened person in an enlightened society' was 'espoused wholeheartedly' by Western Jews, Rachel Feldhay Brenner believes, promising as it did 'to transcend the barriers of religion and nationality', and to '[communicate] confidence in human reasoning and responsible behaviour'. (1997: 28). Women found particular appeal in the 'emancipatory thrust' of this emphasis on rationality and reason (27). This is borne out by the testimonies examined in this chapter. In a striking echo of Carol Gilligan's research (see chapter 2, p. 18), Brenner finds that the four Jewish women diarists whose work she examines each express an 'obligation to salvage a world that proved unable to act on the enlightened view of humanity' (18). While 'as Jews, they were condemned to isolation, suffering, and death, they continued to see themselves as women with obligations towards the world' (10). One could rather expect that this failure of 'The "new faith" of *Bildung*' (28) would constitute an especially bitter theme were it not that, as Carolyn Heilbrun suggests, anger is a fundamental element missing from all women's life-writing before the nineteen-seventies –

'above all other prohibitions' it has been 'forbidden' them (1997: 13). The 'old genre of female autobiography... tends to find beauty even in pain and transform rage into spiritual acceptance' (12). The testimonies examined here, even the most recent, provide striking confirmation. In this extreme situation, where above all anger is justifiable, transient expressions of bitterness are swiftly repressed.

One might ask what other tacit cultural taboos women survivors must negotiate. Of particular relevance to this work is Deirdre Lashgari's contention that 'It can be difficult for the writer herself to look closely into the systems that justify and perpetuate violence' (Lashgari (ed.) 1995: 1). This would be especially true if, as Ringelheim argues (Rittner and Roth (eds.) 1993: 375-7), the sexism of the Jewish culture involuntarily collaborated with that of the Nazis. For a woman writing, honesty 'may... mean transgressing, violating the literary boundaries of the expected and the accepted' (Lashgari (ed.), 2); Holocaust survivors may particularly fear 'desecrating the memories of the dead, or the living, or the Holocaust itself' (Ringelheim in Rittner and Roth (eds.), 377). Lashgari suggests that 'If the woman's root culture also has strong injunctions against "making noise," the temptation to self-silencing increases'. Media sensationalisation of Jewish women's sexual abuse – what she terms 'Packaged and sanitized, "violence as entertainment"' (2) – may also add to women's reluctance to make public their memories. Certainly in these testimonies, women resort to euphemism or outright refusal to name their abuse. Lillian Kremer believes that 'silence about their experiences was often both internally and externally imposed' upon Jewish women. Initially, they met 'indifference and at times hostility'; subsequently their particular 'experiences and perceptions' were 'often obscured or absorbed into accounts and interpretations of male experience' (Lashgari (ed.), 231).

It can be suggested that women's narratives in particular bear out Scott's contention that writing subjects' agency is 'created through situations and statuses conferred on them'; they are not 'unified, autonomous individuals exercising free will' (Smith and Watson (eds.), 1998: 66) Fénelon demonstrates how within Holocaust narrative, the notion of an autonomous self is particularly untenable; the Nazis' control over the subject was total. The stripping of her clothes represent her 'last contact' with her own past identity; henceforth she regards herself via the 'chilly, sneering' gaze of the SS. Now 'considerably less than human', she is 'a grubby object *upsetting the natural order*' (1977: 19, emphasis added). That the SS possess the power to over-see her, to force her to adopt their ideological perspective, strikingly bears out Scott's contention that when 'the meanings of the categories of identity change' the 'possibilities for thinking the self' change with them (Smith and Watson (eds.), 67).

Women endeavouring to narrate such vertiginous shifts of identity do not only encounter the narrative difficulties identified by Susan Stanford Friedman, who argues, paraphrasing



Gusdorf, that 'autobiographical selves are constructed through the process of writing and therefore cannot reproduce exactly the selves that lived'<sup>2</sup>. Particular obstacles face Holocaust survivors. Lawrence Langer notes how oral testimonies in particular articulate a deep rift between everyday memory and the memory of atrocity. The way survivors 'veer from one to the other, often unaware of the discrepancies introduced by their alternating vision' (1991: 5-6) for him 'invalidates the idea of continuity, and even of chronology, that testimonies... seem to offer us by the very structure of their narratives' (5). Kalí Tal finds problematic this inference that survivors 'speak the truth, but do not know what it is they are saying' particularly when the woman survivor Langer focuses on is represented as 'a multiple personality who can never know herself, who can only *be known* from the outside' and who 'is not even a subject in her own self-constitution' (1996: 51). One can suggest that while theories of the unified self appear particularly unsound in examining any narrative of trauma, male narrative also registers these shifts; Viktor Frankl's contains some particularly clear examples. However, Benstock argues that if recognition of the split between the observed and observing subject of autobiography leads to a 'desperate shoring-up of the reflected image against disintegration and division' (1988: 15), the 'linguistic defense networks of male autobiographers' are more successful at repressing discordance. Female autobiographers are 'more aware of their "otherness"' (16); thus, the self 'that would reside at the center of the text is decentered – and often is absent altogether' (20).

For Friedman, the 'very sense of *identification*, *interdependence*, and *community* that Gusdorf dismisses from autobiographical selves' are 'key elements in the development of a woman's identity' (Smith and Watson (eds.), 75). Individualistic models of the self are fundamentally inapplicable because they fail to take into account 'the importance of group identity for women'. Such 'emphasis on separateness' ignores 'the differences in socialization in the construction of male and female gender identity' (72). Friedman contends that 'Isolate individualism is an illusion', the 'privilege of power' (75). If this is the case, it is inappropriate in the self-representation of any survivor. Judith Tydor Baumel believes, with Judith Doneson, that 'the Jew as victim is essentially a "female" figure'<sup>3</sup>. The extreme claims made in some male Holocaust narrative, that isolated individualism represents superior inner strength, fail when the individual is dispossessed of power. The incarcerated is simply one of Primo Levi's 'thousand sealed-off monads' (1989: 23). One can suggest from this that such writing – the self-dramatising representation – is a less authentic narrative of atrocity than that which acknowledges the real position of the incarcerated as truly powerless.

### 3.3. Women's autobiography as "private" writing

Women's 'relationship to the pen' has been 'profoundly contaminated' by 'male distrust and consequent repression of female speech' (Smith, 1987: 7). If she claims access to the public arena she is branded unfeminine; if she challenges these notions of femininity she is censured (10). If she remains silent she denies her own voice (8). By circular reasoning, women's experience is not seen as culturally significant; she is considered unable, therefore, to produce significant life writing (7-8), unable to transcend the private self. Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck maintain that the woman's experience should be given attention; the relationship of her life to her art, however problematic, should not be '[elided] in the name of eliminating the "facile assumption of referentiality"'. Some referentialities – race, gender – are 'crucial'; to ignore them is to 'beg serious political questions' (1988: 13). Women's experience, however, makes for a different narrative organisation than the 'understood... process through which the autobiographer struggles to shape an "identity" out of amorphous subjectivity' (Smith, 1987: 5). As Estelle Jelinek suggests, 'The multidimensionality of women's socially conditioned roles' tends to reproduce itself in narrative patterns of diffusion and diversity', irregularity rather than orderliness. Judged by the 'established critical standards' of male autobiography their works are 'excluded from the genre and cast into the "non-artistic" categories of memoir, reminiscence, and other disjunctive forms' (1980: 17).

The body is viewed traditionally as the locus of confession, a private discourse. The western cultural analogy between 'mind [and] masculinity', and between 'body, femininity, and "nature"' has, Shirley Neuman believes, caused bodies, 'in all their aches and illnesses, as sites of unease' to 'make an appearance in the private genre of the diary' rather than in the 'avowedly public and cultural genre of the autobiography' (Smith and Watson (eds.), 1998: 416). In Holocaust narrative this cultural analogy has been inverted. The body, the primary focus of atrocity, becomes the subject of public discourse; male writers such as Améry declare that mentation, particularly the abstract thought most valued elsewhere, became within incarceration useless, if not dangerous (1980: 10). Yet this has not led to a valuation of women's writing; rather it appears to have been further relegated to the margins.

Within discourses of nationalism, Gisela Brinker-Gabler and Sidonie Smith argue that women are oriented to the 'private sphere of the family identified as the "natural" rather than contractual' public domain of the male (1997: 13). Women are associated with backwardness and conservatism; men, 'agents in the public sphere, are identified with progress, revolution and national destiny'. This opposition 'secures the historical identification of the citizen with the white male subject' (14). In the face of an extreme nationalism which relegated Jewish men and women alike to the family sphere – when men were disallowed public office and the practice of their professions – men and women



had to renegotiate their roles. Women, who traditionally occupy what Brinker-Gabler and Smith term the position of 'the nonperson, the nonsubject, the noncitizen' (14), were forced into the public domain in their place, negotiating with officialdom, transacting business, entering the workplace.

The Holocaust, then, destabilises traditional judgements made about women's experience and the value of her autobiography. Here, women's lives intersect with the historical; her *bios* becomes culturally significant. The private becomes the public. Autobiographies of unknown subjects, Evelyn Hinz believes, 'tend initially to be treated either as history or as fiction until their subjects lose their anonymity' (Kadar (ed.) 1992: 200). However, the 'effect of the [autobiographical] project – the immortalization through publication' (205) – can transform the writer into a public figure, as has been the case with male writers such as Levi, Wiesel and Bettelheim. For no readily apparent reason, women's testimony has failed to bring its writers the same degree of public authority; so far, it has even failed significantly to be counted as history.

### 3.4 Oral and written testimony: some considerations of difference

Langer views oral testimony as a valuable adjunct to written narrative, and in some ways its correlative. The 'familiar (and hence comforting?) literary devices' employed in written testimony, 'style, chronology, analogy, imagery, dialogue, a sense of character, a coherent moral vision' (1991: 19) together with 'the invention of a narrative voice' (41), all serve to narrow the 'vast imaginative space' (19) which otherwise exists between witness and reader. However, this assumption that narrative can establish 'a shared intimacy with the persons and event portrayed' is challenged by the presence in oral testimony of the 'impromptu self' who attests to the estrangement between the witness's 'present and past persona'; this self 'endured [incarceration] in ways no longer comprehensible' to the present-day witness (143). While arguably this split can be detected in the self-contradictions within written testimony – particularly in self-dramatising *versions* of incarceration such as Frankl's – oral testimony possesses greater power to make apparent these discontinuities, Langer believes. The writer strives to narrow 'the abyss separating words from the events they seek to animate'; however, 'witnesses in oral testimonies plunge deeper into it even as they venture to escape' (42). For the present-day witness 'not only memory exists, but the "skin of memory", a hardened shell that [the incarcerated] cannot shed and whose impact is now beyond... control' (4). This 'disruptive memory' recalls 'a personal history vexed by traumas that thwart smooth-flowing chronicles' (2). Felicity de Zulueta, like Langer, views traumatic memory as layered: 'different sets of memories and

their affective components can coexist in the mind, one being unavailable or unconscious to the other' (1992: 101).

Shoshana Felman similarly maintains that oral testimony disrupts conventional expectations that autobiographical narrative will express a unified self (Felman and Laub (eds.) 1992: 4); rather, it 'seems to be composed of bits and pieces of a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance, acts that cannot be constructed as knowledge nor assimilated into full cognition, events in excess of our frames of reference'. Testimony is 'language in process and in trial'; it does not offer 'a completed statement, a totalizable account' (5). Langer suggests that 'the organic metaphor with its evolutionary corollary that dominated much nineteenth-century thought', its 'vocabulary of purpose, and a mental stance to accompany it', has infiltrated written testimony far more than oral (42). Within oral testimony, 'the process of recall divorced from literary effort results in a narrative form unlike the written text, equally rich in spontaneous rather than calculated effects' (129). While this assertion perhaps oversimplifies – Dominick LaCapra (1994: 194) suggests that Langer 'obscures the role of rhetorical conventions in oral discourse and the interaction between "literary" writing and speech' – Langer nevertheless makes us aware that there may be significant differences between the two.

Oral testimony, Dori Laub believes, constitutes a reenactment of memory through which the survivor herself comes to re-member, to reassemble, her experiences. While historians dismember such testimony, intent only on anatomising its historical accuracy, Laub suggests that historical *inaccuracies* may express more clearly the *significance* of a particular event for the incarcerated. Thus a woman who testifies to witnessing the blowing up of all four chimneys at Auschwitz in the prisoners' revolt – where in reality only one was – may be expressing its signification, testifying 'not...[to] the empirical number of the chimneys but to resistance... to the breakage of the frame of death' (Felman and Laub (eds.) 1992: 62). This vital interpretive function is lost when such testimony is discounted. As Geoffrey H. Hartman argues, while immediately after the war 'testimony had the status of an archival document whose primary aim was to increase knowledge', now it is valued for 'its very heterogeneity – memory [has] many shapes, which should not be prematurely unified' (1995: 6).

Laub suggests that 'The longer the story remains untold, the more distorted it becomes in the survivor's conception of it, so much so that the survivor doubts the reality of the actual events' (Felman and Laub (eds.), 1992: 79). One woman survivor had come to believe that 'she herself, and not the perpetrator, was responsible for the atrocities she witnessed. If she could not stop [the Nazis], rescue or comfort the victims, *she* bore the responsibility for their pain' (80). De Zulueta (1994: 16) suggests that the need to attribute



meaning and causality to trauma results in such distorted thinking, self-blame and guilt being preferable to helplessness, yet what is notable is that this woman's exaggerated sense of responsibility is an amplification of those *gendered* beliefs identified by Gilligan (see chapter 2, p. 18).

There could be no objective witnessing from within incarceration, Laub, like Young, maintains:

It was inconceivable that any historical insider could remove herself sufficiently from the contaminating power of the event so as to remain a fully lucid, unaffected witness... No observer could... maintain an integrity – a wholeness and a separateness – that could keep itself uncompromised, unharmed, by his or her very witnessing. The perpetrators... brutally imposed on their victims a delusional ideology whose grandiose coercive pressure totally excluded and eliminated the possibility of an unviolated, unencumbered, and thus sane, point of reference in the witness (81).

Thus there could be 'no concurrent "knowing" or assimilation of the history of the occurrence'; it is 'only now, *belatedly*, that the event begins to be historically grasped' (84).

### 3.5. Analysing Holocaust testimony

We can conclude, then, that what Langer terms *vision* and *version* equally originate in constructed selves; we have likewise established that gender plays a crucial role in such constructions. Smith suggests that there is 'no essential, original, coherent autobiographical self before the moment of self-narrating' (Smith and Watson (eds.), 1998: 108) rather, 'autobiographical storytelling is always a performative occasion', where the narrator, who is 'both the same and not the same' as the autobiographer and the subject of the narration, enacts 'contextually marked and sometimes radically divergent narratives of identity' (109). This model can fully accommodate the effects that gender ideologies have on self-construction; it can also allow for the discontinuities of the self which occur in narrating trauma. It absolves the narrator of charges of inconsistency and historical inaccuracy; it can apply equally well to oral as to written testimony. This model will accordingly be employed in analysing the unpublished narratives which follow.

### 3.6 The women's testimonies

#### 3.6.1 The rationale of survival

Primo Levi argues that 'a long training is needed to survive [in Auschwitz] in the struggle of each one against all' (1987: 48). In one of his not infrequent self-contradictions Frankl

admits to the ineffectiveness of spiritual resistance as a survival strategy: only those survived in the long-term who 'had lost all scruples in their fight for existence; [who] were prepared to use every means, honest and otherwise, even brutal force, theft and betrayal of their friends, in order to save themselves' (1974: 3). Essentially, both maintain, survivors were saved by luck, and 'there is not much sense in trying to find something common to all their destinies, beyond perhaps their initial good health' (Levi, 1989: 34). However, women in the narratives examined in this chapter represent their survival in a manner radically divergent from Frankl and Levi. Relationships were of primary importance; their domestic skills aided them in forming and maintaining bonds and in mitigating their atrocious living conditions in whatever ways they could.

Baneth, incarcerated in the mixed Auschwitz B-II camp, observed that women were 'much harder' and better able to survive than men (Appendix I, 7). Ehrlich repeats somewhat ironically a truism she heard after the war: incarceration was 'somehow, genetically' worse for men, who are 'not equipped to withstand that much physical hardship' (Appendix IV, 50). These assertions go against centuries-old cultural claims for men's greater physical and mental strength and power of endurance, and women's corresponding mental and physical weakness. They introduce a different, gendered perspective into the debate about how much agency in his/her own survival an incarcerated person possessed; a debate which has been conducted with little regard for the views of women.

Langer's objections to 'the myth that survival was somehow *primarily* determined by attitude or choice' (1982: 128) has been discussed in the previous chapter. It has, Langer believes, been perpetuated by, for example, Terrence Des Pres who, writing generally of incarceration, is regarded as authoritative. Langer's disagreement with writers such as Bettelheim and Frankl centre upon their claims that spiritual resistance constituted an aid to physical survival. Langer insists that this could not overcome 'typhus, dysentery, malnutrition, beatings, and the inability to carry on unendurable work' (128). Women's testimonies challenge both these viewpoints. Pravda remembers a woman kapo nursing her twelve year-old daughter – kept in hiding in the camp because of her age – through typhoid (Appendix VI, 96). Most women testify to ways in which they made the appalling physical work more endurable for each other (Pravda, Appendix VI: 96; Ehrlich, Appendix IV: 45). A constant thread linking these testimonies is how co-operation and mutual care aided women's survival.

Both Eugen Kogon and Elie Cohen, authors of classic and influential works on incarceration, attest that '"luck" is a component of personal ability' (Kogon, 1998: 309), a position endorsed by women survivors (Ehrlich, Appendix IV: 50). Men's assertions that one could enhance one's chances of survival by obtaining privileged work (Kogon, 309; Levi, 1987: 95), by collaboration (Levi, 1989: 27) or by homosexual prostitution (Cohen,



1988: 141; Levi, 1987: 95) find general endorsement. However, women's assertions that emotional bonding and the employment of domestic skills augmented *their* luck have yet to gain acceptance. Universalising accounts of "the" concentration camp such as Kogon's and Cohen's scarcely refer to women at all.

The most marked difference between these women's testimony and men's is that women represent incarceration as a struggle to maintain their roles and identities as mothers, carers and friends. Their skills in adapting and mending clothes, organising their living and working arrangements to the best advantage, sharing food and nursing family or friends are put to the service of this aim.

Elie Wiesel records how a father is abandoned by his son on a forced march (1981: 103); how a son kills his father for his bread ration, and is himself killed by the men who witness this (112-3). As his own father lies ill Wiesel is told by a Buchenwald doctor: "'Here, every man has to fight for himself and not think of anyone else. Even of his father. Here, there are no fathers, no brothers, no friends. Everyone lives and dies for himself alone'" (121-2). His reaction to his father's death is a degree of relief (123). These women, conversely, testify to risking punishment or death to steal clothes, shoes and food for family or friends. Baneth remembers the fantastic life-or-death gamble she and a friend took while in Auschwitz, bargaining with Dr. Mengele for their mothers' lives. Another girl who tried to do the same was gassed along with her mother (Appendix I, 10). The profound grief these women express for mothers, sisters and friends who died is another common theme.

By and large, the women do not possess the trade skills or physical strength developed through manual work which helped a number of male prisoners to obtain privileges and better rations. Baneth, a tailor, is exceptional. All endured the harsh physical labour which was the fate of the unskilled in the concentrationary system. Nothing in their culture prepared young women for punishing manual labour such as building or demolition work. These cultural disadvantages may be set against any "genetic" advantages women were supposed afterwards to have possessed.

This chapter is organised around these themes which recur within women's narrative: the central importance of family and friends and the creation of "camp family" relationships; the uses of domestic skills, the experience and organisation of manual labour; the trauma of loss of feminine identity and the underlying sexual threat. The anguish behind their experiences of sexual abuse is often most eloquently represented by halting narrative, euphemism or silence. Finally, these women represent themselves as having possessed some degree of personal agency, however minimal, in not dying. As Ehrlich maintains, 'You've got to be lucky, first of all, so they don't shoot you... But that's only a very small part, the rest is up to you'. Survival is 'really more complex', a 'combination of many things'

(Appendix IV, 50). Garbasz-Zimet maintains that 'In order to survive, you had to have luck, courage, and a friend or sister, and I had all three' (Appendix V: 71).

With regard to the translation of women's lived experience into narrative, Joan Ringelheim identifies some crucial questions:

Do the women survivors of the Holocaust lie? Engage in self-deception? Bad faith? Just not tell the truth? Mythologize in order to keep surviving? Does the women's understanding of themselves during the Holocaust differ from what happened? How do the survivors deal with life having been such a ghastly disappointment because of the Holocaust? How live with themselves unless they transform the story? Is the story they tell less about the Holocaust than about present suffering over the past and the attempt to survive its memory? Is the only possibility for survival of any kind the creation of some kind of "cover story" for an individual or a people? How often do survivors say things because they have a sense of obligation to their group, as women or as Jews? (1993: 389).

While this interrogation quite correctly warns against the danger of 'some sort of glorification' of women's transforming genocide into a positive experience (387) Ringelheim's restricting this interrogation to women's testimony is unwarranted; these questions can equally be asked of male narrative. Throughout their testimonies these women's accounts appear remarkably free of self- or collective valorisation. What is noticeable is the way in which they draw attention to their own unreliability as narrators, meticulously stating where information has been gained after the Holocaust, downplaying – often humorously – their own acts of altruism. If Holocaust narratives are inevitably "cover stories", as Young argues (1990: 15-16), these women are at pains to point out the patches and joins.

### 3.6.2 Sisters, "camp sisters" and mothers

Garbasz-Zimet attributes her survival to the presence of her sister Minna (Appendix V: 53), Biber to her sister Sara (Appendix II, 22). Long after the Holocaust Baneth confesses to her abiding guilt for having dragged her mother through camp after camp, selection after selection, only to have her die in Bergen Belsen after liberation, even though her son has assured her that without her mother's presence Baneth herself would probably have died (Appendix I, 16). Salt, parted from her mother in Bergen Belsen, terrified and exhausted, nevertheless searched among the living and the dead for a day and a half until she found her (Appendix VIII: 122). While Ehrlich, who lost both her mother and her sister, states that family ties burdened the inmates with worry, it was nevertheless 'terribly important to have a mate with whom you could share your thoughts and... hopes' (Appendix IV, 50-1). All the women concur with her that 'Human relationships were at a high' (51). All in their various ways demonstrate 'how an ordinary girl, together with her sister (and this is very important)



could stay alive under the terrible conditions that were the daily life of the concentration camps' (Garbasz-Zimet, Appendix V: 55-6), if sister is taken in its broadest sense of "camp sister", a term used by many inmates (Gurewitsch (ed.), 1998: 101) to include siblings or strangers who bonded together during incarceration. Brana Gurewitsch describes this relationship as 'not a rational act, but rather an instinctual reaching out' (100), stemming from the same instinct which led Pravda to shout after her husband on the Auschwitz ramp to look for friends and keep in a group (Appendix VI: 94). Yet as Gurewitsch and others note, 'Although close relationships between brothers or between fathers and sons did exist... they were not as prevalent as those between sisters or between mothers and their children'. The "camp sister" relationship seems not to have had a male counterpart: 'Although men who were not family relations assisted each other in concentration camps, the assistance was more likely to have been a single instance, a moment of advice or a physical gesture, rather than a long-term relationship of mutual trust and caring' (1998: xix; Des Pres, 1976: 98). Sustained help among men, when it occurred, stemmed from political motives (Des Pres, 128) and loyalty was to the group or its informing ideology, rather than to close friends (Gurewitsch, xix). Women also remember many single instances of aid to acquaintances or strangers. Garbasz-Zimet was given extra food by a kitchen worker in Christianstadt labour camp, despite the risks she took; a woman overseer in the factory let her sleep during night shift. When Garbasz-Zimet was caught, the woman lied to the guard to prevent her from being punished (Appendix V: 72).

Women maintained their relationships often at the risk of punishment or death. When an Auschwitz kapo gave Biber the job of cleaning the barrack – she would no longer have to stand outside after rollcall – Biber immediately risked punishment by asking that her sister share the privilege: 'we never parted, my sister and I, we were always together' (Appendix II: 22). Similarly Garbasz-Zimet's sister Minna, who had successfully avoided capture for forced labour, allowed herself to be caught as soon as she saw that Shulamit had been (Appendix V: 68). Put on separate work duties on arrival at Christianstadt, Garbasz-Zimet strove to rejoin her sister by impressing a foreman with her willingness to work (70). The sisters shared their food; Garbasz-Zimet worked in place of Minna when she was particularly exhausted (74). On the death-march she begged shoes for Minna when hers fell to pieces (76); In Belsen, they nursed each other in turn through typhoid (80, 82). Their elder sister Fanny, reunited with them in Belsen, jeopardised her privileged position to get her sisters better conditions, risking her life to smuggle food to Garbasz-Zimet when she was ill: 'she would have been shot had the SS discovered what she had done' (80). Spier, incarcerated in Belsen with her sister Gisi and ill with dysentery, remembers how her sister stripped off her dress, which was 'covered in shit', washed it at the latrine and swung it in the sun until it was dry. Spier herself risked being shot to go out one night and beg for medication for Gisi, screaming with the pain of earache (IX: 127).



Ehrlich's instinct for the survival of herself and her 'group of friends... good, clever girls, good mates' (Appendix IV: 43) led her, in Mauthausen, to take the 'craziest' risk to snatch an armful of clothing from under the spotlights of the guard-towers, scale the wall back into her barrack and fling them through the window to her friends. Swiftly, all the women clothed themselves with the extra garments which protected them on the next stage of their winter march to Belsen. None was caught (47). Not all the risks paid off. Garbasz-Zimet remembers hearing how two sisters refused to leave their weakened third on the death march. '[S]ome of the others said that all three were shot. There was no reason for those who told the story to lie about it' (Appendix V: 76).

As Baneth's testimony demonstrates, women ran a greater risk in protecting their mothers. Baneth's thirty-eight year-old mother 'always did go first' into painful situations such as tattooing, in order to give her daughter an idea of what was involved (Appendix I, 5). In an agonising work detail carrying stones, Baneth took the lead, keeping her exhausted mother out of sight of the guards (6). This sharing of the maternal role continued until her mother's death: 'we were always helping each other' (12). They shared food even when both were skeletal (11). The separation from a mother – even one who, judged by Wiesel's standards, would be a liability – brought not relief but a sense of catastrophic loss. Salt's mother was badly gored by a bull in the abattoir where she worked. The women in the camp donated their sugar rations to the clearly dying woman. She was sent to Belsen in a different truck to Salt, for whom the separation was 'the worst thing' about her nightmare journey among dead bodies (Appendix VIII: 121). Once Salt found her mother in Belsen, she stayed with her until she died (122). Baneth's mother's death from complications after typhoid occurred a month after liberation. Before becoming ill herself she had nursed Baneth and the four other women in their shared room, all friends, through typhoid, 'day and night... doing everything she possibly could... My friend and her mother, they never have forgotten how much she were [sic] looking after all of us'. Her death 'was the worst thing ever could have happened... it changed my life'. It took Baneth 'a very, very long time' to come to terms with her grief. She has since met other women who even now cannot reconcile themselves to the irony of their mothers dying 'practically freed' (Appendix I: 12).

Biber, ill herself with typhoid, was similarly distraught when her sister Sara died: 'they told me [in hospital] I was forever trying to run away, wanting my sister, always dreaming about my sister' (Appendix II: 23). When Spier's sister Gisi died 'I did not want to live anymore, became melancholic and had hallucinations. Gisi had been my support during all these years' (Appendix IX: 127-8). Salt states that 'Especially what hurts me most is losing my sister. [...] I can't forget it, not for one minute. [...] The older I get the more I miss her and it's not getting any easier with time.' (Appendix VIII: 123). Pravda (Appendix VII: 97) and Ehrlich (Appendix IV: 47) both express a kind of elegiac grief for the deaths of friends.



Ehrlich links the faltering of her iron determination to live to the realisation, previously repressed, that her sister and all her friends were dead (49). These women's grief for friends cannot easily be distinguished from grief over a blood relation. It 'recurs often enough in our encounter with the voices and faces of... woman survivors' for Langer to acknowledge it as a particular gendered aspect of survival (1998: 44). Yet to suggest as he does (44-5) that such grief negates the value of the "camp sister" relationship by impairing the survivor's afterlife (because of grief, a woman 'cannot embrace her role as wife and mother!') is to ignore the fact that without it, both women may well not have survived. Gurewitsch states that the women's 'close and long-lasting relationships... [became] a source of mutual assistance and strength' (1998: xviii); while they did not ensure survival, she maintains that they contributed to it (100).

### 3.6.3 Domestic skills and their value

Ruth Bondy, incarcerated in the mixed camp of B-IIb, as was Baneth, reports, like her, that women 'In the same conditions, with the same scarce nourishment... could bear hunger more easily, and deteriorated more slowly, than the men' (Ofer and Weitzman (eds.), 1998: 324). She maintains that what caused this difference was women's ability to improve their environment in whatever minute ways they could. At its most basic, it helped morale.

Brunstein and her mother, both suffering severe malnutrition in Lodz ghetto, ground up their appalling coffee-husk ration with potato peelings, partly in order to stop the abrasive husks injuring their stomachs; many people died because of this. They would 'try and make little patties and call them salmon patties or fish patties, all kinds of things [...] to pretend that we were actually eating some kind of food'. Their humour helped as much as this "cooking": 'You had to laugh because if you didn't laugh occasionally... none of us would have survived' (Appendix III: 29).

Pravda's description of Jews 'squashed like vermin', sixteen women to one 'average size' room in Theresienstadt ghetto, teeming with *real* vermin, would appear to make a mockery of any attempt at cleanliness. Yet the women 'tried desperately to make it as clean and decent as possible, so you washed the little bit [...] in front of your bunk' (Appendix VI: 94). Levi (1987: 46) stresses the futility of such small everyday domestic rituals in Auschwitz, no matter how an "old" inmate tried to explain that washing and grooming helped the prisoner psychologically 'to remain alive, not to begin to die' (47). Many women testify to a realisation that struggling with the appalling sanitary conditions in Birkenau was necessary to maintain something more vital to themselves than cleanliness.

Bondy describes women's daily struggle to sweep their rooms out and to wash; they would mend and wash the men's clothing, clean them of parasites and scrape together extra rations for them (Ofer and Weitzman (eds.), 1998: 318), often cooking up smuggled or gleaned food and scraps on small stoves in their living quarters (317). 'Women, more than men, tried to convert their places on the three-tiered bunks into a surrogate home, by covering the mattress with a coloured sheet, hanging photographs on the back wall, or laying a napkin on the plank that housed their possessions' (311-12)<sup>4</sup>. In an extreme locus such as Auschwitz it might appear facile to talk of organising the everyday. Levi claims that 'One learns quickly enough to wipe out the past... when one is forced to' (1987: 42). Frankl performed the same mental severance (1974: 12). Women, on the contrary, did not, striving rather to recreate whatever they could of normality in these atrocious conditions

Ehrlich, who rates cold as a torment above hunger (Appendix IV: 47) describes how out of 'mountains of rags, clothing that you have never seen... in theatrical wardrobes' she was allocated a flimsy green ballgown 'with paillettes, pearls... of olive green... irregular hemline', a child's coat and men's shoes 'which saved my life' (42). In this outfit she survived hard labour and a death-march; it was cut from her body in Belsen (50). In the freezing conditions in their labour camp the voluminous costume underwent transformation; material was snipped from here and there to make mittens and a headscarf: 'Everybody became a dressmaker. It's amazing what you can do' (44). Pravda remembers the 'blissful' gloves made for her in labour camp by a woman whose one needle circulated the camp as the inmates concocted garments from scraps: 'A needle became as important as for Robinson Crusoe' (Appendix VI: 96).

Later, this chapter will explore the effect on women's identity of these bizarre outfits, often described in retrospect with an element of humour. Yet their lives often depended on them. Pravda was tossed a pair of 'silver evening shoes' from the clothing heap; she risked throwing them back and queueing for another pair. 'I thought, if I'm going to wear evening shoes for work I'll die' (Appendix VI: 95). Such garments which possessed the power before the war to transform women's appearances, signifying wealth, beauty or festivity, now had the power to kill. Here again, there can be no parallel with men's experiences; while garments may not have fitted, men did not have to labour in winter in ballgowns and dancing pumps. How many women died directly as a result of being given such clothing? Pravda's luck held; she received a 'blissful thing', a pair of men's shoes: 'if you put some straw or old newspapers or anything into man's shoes you can survive the most horrible winter' (95). Similarly, Ehrlich's shoes, 'men's ballroom, black patent shoes, size twenty, or huge' she believes 'saved my life' (Appendix IV: 42).

Baneth's tailoring skills saved her mother and herself from stone-carrying, gaining both of them a place in "Canada". Here, she "organised" warm clothing, smuggling it out under



her own clothes and distributing it among inmates less lucky. In return, they gave her sugar: 'that's how it was in the camp, if you [did] something for them they did do something for you' (Appendix I: 6). Baneth twice risked being shot to scavenge men's shoes from among the dead for herself and her mother. The shoes 'were my survival'; 'The most important thing of all was really the shoes' (7).

Garbasz-Zimet remembers how she and her colleagues shortened their dresses to provide foot-rags to pad their wooden clogs in Auschwitz; this left them with 'nearly no clothes to wear' (Appendix V: 71) in Christianstadt. However, friendships grew between the Jewish labourers and the conscripted factory workers, who gave them needles and thread from parcels they received from home. 'The inmate women then started sewing trousers from half a blanket, and then wore the other half over their shoulders' (71-2). Rags could be put to ingenious uses. Olga Lengyel describes the typical woman inmate's 'beggar bundle' known as "Pinkly"... a piece of rag, a sock or stocking, sometimes an old cap, tied into a sort of bag that was our "hand-bag," "closet," and "pantry." (1995: 148). Baneth had a similar little bag which fitted under her arm; into this went 'treasures' scavenged from the larders of half-destroyed houses in Hamburg (Appendix I: 11). On arrival at Bergen, at the risk of being shot, she filled the bag from a pile of rhubarb lying in the station yard; she and her mother 'lived on those rhubarbs a whole week' in Belsen (12).

Women organised and shared more than just food and clothing. The notorious *appells* were anything from a torment to lethal for incarcerated inmates soaked through and exhausted after work. Bruno Bettelheim recalls a twelve-hour punishment *appell* on 'a terribly cold night when a snowstorm was blowing' (1987: 136), in which more than twenty prisoners died. 'Being exposed to the weather was a terrible torture; to see one's friends die without being able to help, and to stand a good chance of dying too, created a situation which obviously the prisoner as an individual could not meet successfully' (137).

This is the solution Bettelheim claims his colleagues devised:

the individual as such had to disappear in the mass. Threats by the guards became ineffective because the mental attitude of most prisoners was now changed. Whereas before they had feared for themselves and tried to protect themselves as well as possible, they now became depersonalised... It was as if what happened did not "really" happen to yourself. There was psychologically... a split between the figure to whom things happened and the prisoner himself who was... a detached observer (137).

Pravda and her colleagues dealt with a punishment *appell* – 'they let us kneel or stand in the mud for twenty-four hours' – in a far more practical manner. Realising that 'The only way to survive was by sticking to each other' the women in their rows of fives regularly changed positions, all the women crowding together to share body warmth: 'After the people on the outside were frozen they went into the middle of the row and we squashed in, it was like a caterpillar. [...] This is how you help each other' (Appendix VI: 85). Delbo

remembers how at *appell* 'each [woman] places her hands under the arms of the one in front of her. Since they cannot do it in the first row, we rotate. Backs to chests, we stand pressed against each other... we establish a single circulatory system' (1995: 63). It did not help much; yet, as Baneth remembers, 'You don't know how important this bodily warmth [is]' (Appendix I: 4).

#### 3.6.4 The organisation of labour

Nowhere did the Nazis overturn traditional gender norms so completely as in making women undertake forced manual labour. The labour organisation in Theresienstadt typifies women's situation. Despite the fact that they had voluntarily undergone vocational training in the years prior to incarceration, to prepare for emigration, the traditional division of labour was still very much in evidence in the early days. Most of the women worked as cleaners, nannies, teachers, nurses; in tailoring and laundry (Bondy in Ofer and Weitzman (eds.): 1998: 313). Initially 'the idea of women doing "men's jobs" was not well received'; even after women began carpentry work, all heavy manual labour – 'loading, transporting, building, water and sewage engineering' – was still done by men. The preservation of these cultural norms 'reflected not only the Jewish past but the German present: the SS command in Theresienstadt was composed of men; women only held clerical jobs' (313). Only after Theresienstadt had become 'a city of women' in autumn, 1944, following mass transportations, did women take on 'all the jobs previously done by men, including heavy manual work like unloading coal and potatoes' (322).

The Germans' desperate need for unskilled labour to repair bomb damage and dig defensive earthworks spared women from gassing, sometimes as they waited their turn for the overworked gas chambers in Birkenau (Ehrlich, Appendix IV: 44). However, labour caused deep and lasting suffering, both during and after incarceration. Salt remembers '[taking] apart the bombed-out houses brick by brick' and carrying sacks of cement and sand on their backs; 'nobody had any strength to do it but... we had to show... that we are strong' otherwise they would be sent back to Auschwitz for gassing. She sustained lasting damage to her spine (Appendix VIII: 121). The women were regularly worked through air-raids. Outside Hamburg, Baneth witnessed a group of women blown to pieces by a bomb; only after this were the women allowed into German air-raid shelters (Appendix I:10-11). A number of Brunstein's friends in her labour camp died, unable to survive the salt mines where they were sent to work (Appendix III: 32). Here again, however, women established ways of mitigating the tortures. Pravda and her colleagues, digging deep trenches against the advancing Russian army, devised a rota: the woman at the bottom – doing the hardest



work, excavating the wet sand – and the one on the top, exposed to raw winds, exchanged places regularly with the woman in the middle, the most sheltered position; 'we changed in the shift without anybody telling us to' so that the women undertook the hardest work for 'at utmost an hour' (Appendix VI: 96). Ehrlich and her colleagues had to carry tree trunks on their shoulders to a sawmill, four to a trunk, their shoulders bleeding, staggering in snow a foot deep: 'It was very important that four girls is a good team, no troubles or tantrums', and to keep step they sang (Appendix IV: 45).

Turn-taking rituals, devised to ensure that communal pots of food were shared out equally (Salt, Appendix VIII: 121), were also employed on the death marches. Ehrlich and her exhausted friends, marching in temperatures she estimates as 'thirty-five degrees below zero centigrade' discovered that 'you could walk and sleep at the same time.' They 'devised a way that the five of us were supporting the girl in the middle who was hanging on for her sleep and the feet and the legs were still moving'. Regularly they changed places, '[a]nd you could actually relax and get some kind of relief' (Appendix IV: 46). In Mauthausen, where bunks meant for one woman had to be shared between four, Ehrlich and her friends 'made an agreement' that two women 'will really squeeze themselves to the barest edge so the other two can stretch a little bit and sleep and then take turns to change' (47).

### 3.6.5 Identity and femininity

An overwhelming number of women's narratives stress that the most shattering blow to women's identity came with the undressing, the shaving and the intimate body searches which transformed them, as Baneth states, into 'animals which are herded' (Appendix I: 4). 'I have the feeling when I arrived in Auschwitz from that day onwards I turned into [an] animal. I wasn't human any more' (5). Levi argues that the Nazis deliberately eroded individual identity in order to justify mass extermination (1989: 101). However, these women's testimonies suggest that what they lost was specifically their *feminine* identity, which appears nearly identical to their sense of themselves as human. There is little evidence of a male equivalent of this loss of gendered identity.

Baneth among others articulates the subtle blunting of human responsiveness. The death of her sixty year-old grandfather in Theresienstadt after a gruelling *appell* lasting over twenty-four hours came as a relief to her mother and herself: 'we were already hard. You get practical about everything... you see all the terrible things around you and you think what is the best in the circumstances... You don't think like a normal human being' (Appendix I: 4). Those who, like Brunstein in Lodz, witnessed newborn babies being thrown

from second-floor windows into lorries (Appendix III: 28) has, as Baneth states, 'a lot of trauma behind [you]' (Appendix I: 2) even before arrival at Auschwitz. Yet the initiation process is, for most, the pivotal point at which identity shatters. Most represent arrival at Auschwitz as a moment out of time, as vivid now as then. Baneth remembers the brutal stripping of illusion. Her father had been imprisoned at Auschwitz; the family had received his death certificate from there. Yet when Baneth told her mother where their train had arrived her face 'lit up for happiness and she said, "Maybe after all we'll meet Daddy and he won't be dead"'. Baneth's 'flick of a moment' image of Auschwitz is of '[an] absolute big pile like a mountain, a pile of bodies... on top of that pile was a woman, just naked, thin like a bone, like those dead people but she was alive and stroking with her hands one of those heads' (Appendix I: 4). Ehrlich, schooled in the Theresienstadt theatricals, represents Auschwitz as something staged: 'what I saw was a world of something like if you would fall through a trap in a stage into an underworld'. It remains for her an 'absolutely fixed... fossilised' impression' (Appendix IV: 41). Baneth also believes that the initiation represented a deliberate 'policy... to make you so shocked you can't think straight' (Appendix I: 4). Many narrative strategies are employed to attempt to delineate this unearthly artifice; most suggest that its incomprehensibility is itself beyond comprehension. This perhaps accounts for the often bizarre and inappropriate metaphors of circus and carnival: Gisela Perl describes herself and her colleagues as a 'a ghostly carnival' of 'grisly monsters, ridiculous and sub-human' following their clothing allocation (1992: 46-7). For Ehrlich, even theatrical metaphor fails adequately to represent the women: 'Fellini would be pleased to have such imagination to put things together, what we saw'. 'In the end, you started to look at yourself as a caricature' (Appendix IV:42-3). Pravda represents her companions 'dressed [...] for a macabre comedy' (Appendix VI: 96).

The loss of identity is often linked to the loss or surrendering of a particular object or memento. Baneth remembers handing over the charm-bracelet, a gift from her father: 'That meant more to me to give up than my clothes or anything' (Appendix I: 5). Brunstein tried to smuggle a photo and her mother's powder compact through the selection; the loss of these signified the more calamitous loss of her mother (Appendix III: 31). Spier and her sister, realising they would lose their treasured family photograph album, cut from the photos 'the heads of our beloved ones' and made them into tiny parcels; Spier smuggled hers through the undressing process (Appendix IX: 125-6). Significantly, a woman caught concealing these small signifiers of identity, in themselves valueless, was often punished as severely as one trying to hide valuables. With these losses – personal effects, clothing, and above all, head hair – the women shed their identity: 'we did not know each other any more. Instead of the exhausted, tortured but still self-respecting women who entered [the building], we were a heart-rending lot of crying clowns, a ghastly carnival procession marching towards the last festival: death' (Perl, 1992: 30). Ehrlich, with 'some kind of



instinct of a monkey', climbed to the top tier of a barrack where the women of her transport, silent and shaved, huddled below her. 'The effect was so devastating. You don't see yourself... but you can see your neighbours, your friend, your sister and you don't recognise them. Because they suddenly look like dummies from a fashion window – no hair, no nothing' (Appendix IV: 42). Earlier Ehrlich had believed she would never come to resemble the group of naked women she saw running from one block to the next. Now, in a terrifying epiphany she realised 'that's what's happening, we are already becoming those creatures whom I saw when we arrived, and the change that takes place in your mental process is that you start following the rules of this underworld' (Appendix IV: 42).

The self-denigration in these representations suggest that, like Fénelon, they view their defeminised selves through the Nazi gaze. The women's bewilderment and unrecognition after being shaved – Baneth remembers that a mother and two daughters did not recognise each other (Appendix II: 21) – becomes mourning for the loss of their hair, 'the last vestiges of our feminine pride' (Sternberg Newman 1978: 17), as if femininity and identity are both signified by *surface*, whose loss signifies a death. Spier states that 'When I saw Gisi without her beautiful curls, I started to cry terribly, because she looked like a spectre' (126). Livia Bitton Jackson records this transmutation:

it is the absence of hair which transformed individual women into like bodies. Age and personal differences melt away. Facial expressions disappear. Instead, a blank, senseless stare emerges on a thousand faces of one naked, unappealing body. In a matter of minutes even the physical aspect of our numbers seems reduced – there is less of a substance to our dimensions. We become a monolithic mass. Inconsequential.

From *blöde Lumpen*, 'idiotic whores', we became *blöde Schweine*, 'idiotic swine' (1994: 78).

Denuded of signifiers of individuality, the women become bereft of the power to signify themselves; the SS can name and rename them at will. Ehrlich describes this as the moment when 'the reality you remember is starting to recede' (Appendix IV: 42). Biber states that 'They shaved off our hair [so] that I never could even remember that I had hair on my head' (Appendix II: 21); hair and prior identity fall away together.

For women, sexual denigration was inherent with this process. When Frankl recalls that 'not only our heads were shorn, but not a hair was left on our entire bodies' (13) there is no reference to the sexual abuse, jeering and innuendo to which women like Jackson were subjected. Brunstein remembers young German soldiers 'joking about our bodies. I was only sixteen at the time and I still remember those remarks which I even now cannot repeat. Then we were being shaven, which I think is quite a well-known fact' (Appendix III: 31). Baneth recalls the SS men 'looking at you and some did touch women and things like that, hitting them over their bottoms and making fun' (Appendix I: 5). Garbasz-Zimet, fourteen, medicalises her assault as 'a gynaecological examination. One girl explained that they were looking for valuables. This was the first time in my life that I had such an



examination' (Appendix V: 67). With such narrative evasions do women attempt to cover the pain they endured during what was often their first physical exposure to male scrutiny. Indeed, for most, as for Garbasz-Zimet, this was the first time they had seen their mothers naked (67). Earlier narratives are often angrily explicit: Olga Lengyel writes in 1947 that she was 'compelled to undergo a thorough examination in the Nazi manner, oral, rectal and vaginal... We had to lie across a table, stark naked, while they probed' (1997: 28). Perl had to watch 'while they seized one woman after another and with dirty fingers searched the depths of her body' (1992: 18). Equally she makes clear the motivation: the eyes of the young SS men 'shone with expectation, their ape-like movements betrayed an unhealthy, abnormal sexual excitement' (43). Baumel suggests that the reticence in recent narratives may stem from an increased awareness of the use to which such descriptions might be put (1998: 47) now that the 'unholy trinity of kitch [sic], sex and death' are often 'the backdrop for creating a blockbuster Holocaust heroine' (150). The survivor writing in the 1980s and 1990s has become sensitised to the way the camera lens and the SS scrutiny are often in alignment for 'the pleasure of using another person as an object through sight and subjecting their image to a curious and controlling gaze' (Vance (ed.), 1992: 190-1). Omer Bartov finds that even in *Schindler's List* the shower scene is a 'troubling' example of 'Hollywood's convention of providing sexual distraction'; the 'mass of attractive, frightened, naked women... is more appropriate to a sadomasochistic film than to its horrifying context... the only spectators to have derived any sexual pleasure from observing such scenes were the SS' (1996: 170).

The bizarre reclothing of women signifies a further disruption of their identity; one forced on them by the SS. Some women, like Sternberg Newman, were allocated men's clothes (1978: 18); some were given a mixture, like Salt: 'a large skirt which [...] wouldn't stay up and a man's pyjama jacket' (Appendix VIII: 120). Brunstein had 'a skirt which reached to the ground, a nightshirt, nothing else, no shoes or underwear or anything' (Appendix III: 31). Pravda saw women forced into 'evening dresses and embroidered dresses, light dresses. I was thrown a summer dress, a very short one, no stockings, no underwear' (Appendix VI: 95). Biber remembers that 'the littlest girl had the longest dress and the tallest woman, [it] wouldn't even cover her' (Appendix II: 21). Many women believe that deliberate purpose lay behind this the mismatch. Susan Fromberg Schaeffer in her fiction articulates the essential sadism underlying this process:

"Let's see," one of the men said, looking at Sonya; she was very tall. "This should be fine for you," and he gave her a short dress... "Let's see," he said again looking at me, five foot one, "this is for you," and he handed me a huge dress, so long it trailed down to the floor, and two gigantic sweaters. "No trading!" he warned us both. We looked like madwomen. "Why are they doing it?" Sonya asked. "Look, Sonya," I said, "they are just enjoying themselves; right now, we are only flies, and they are pulling off wings." (1994: 263).



As Bondy remembers, however (see chapter 1, p. 10), the process of re-covering identity of a kind began almost immediately. Salt's mother tore a piece from her jacket as a belt for her unwieldy skirt (Appendix VIII: 120). Some women had retained mementoes; Baneth hid her mother's engagement ring on a hair-clip behind her ear; because she was not shaved, she managed successfully to smuggle it into camp: 'How silly you can be in the situation... we lost absolutely everything, we had no idea we nearly lost our lives and my mother was so much— about her engagement ring... maybe that was the human part in us' (Appendix I: 5). Ehrlich hid under her tongue a ring made for her by a boyfriend, despite being warned that another girl had been 'beaten up and put aside' for doing the same: 'to me this ring was the strength, the tower of strength' (Appendix IV: 42). Sorting clothing in "Canada" Baneth found 'a little comb and a small piece of mirror'. She hid them; they became 'everything for me.' 'I was still a young girl, I still wanted, even in those circumstances, to look at myself, how I do my hair [...], that was the young girl in me. My mother didn't bother about the mirror, she said, "What is so important, who looks at you anyway?"' (Appendix I: 6-7). However, as numerous women testify, their appearance – and particularly their attempt consciously to conform to Nazi ideals of *feminine* appearance – could mean life or death. Salt remembers the desperate attempts to disguise her with signifiers of adult womanhood when children under eighteen were condemned to death; women lent her lipstick and powder, a headscarf. 'I was actually twelve and I looked like eight'. The SS man who 'looked me up and down... could see that I wasn't eighteen years old' (Appendix VIII: 119), yet he allowed her to live, as if recognising and rewarding Salt's efforts to appear acceptably feminine.

### 3.6.6 Sexuality

For Levi the 'demolition of a man' (1987: 32) which occurs on admission into Auschwitz resides in the loss of his possessions: 'Imagine now a man who is deprived of everyone he loves, and at the same time of his house, his habits, his clothes, in short, of everything he possesses: he will be a hollow man, reduced to suffering and needs, forgetful of dignity and restraint, for he who loses all often easily loses himself' (33). 'Nothing belongs to us any more; they have taken away our clothes, our shoes, even our hair... they will take away even our name' (33). As S. Lillian Kremer argues, 'There is not a word in this male writer's devastating description suggesting sexual assault or concern about diminished sexual attractiveness or procreative capacity. The reductive experience denies men the trappings of social status and assaults their personhood rather than their sex and gender' (1999: 133). Levi perceives correctly that 'the voice of the Lager' articulates 'the resolution of [the Nazis] to annihilate us first as men in order to kill us more slowly afterwards' (57). Yet his

use of this universalising "men" does not specify how *women's* sense of themselves was attacked.

While the media have made widespread use of women's sexual abuse, both women survivors and researchers have 'minimized the significance of the specifically female aspects of... Holocaust experience' (Ringelheim in Ofer and Weitzman (eds.), 1998: 343) and 'ignored issues of sexual vulnerability and assaults against women' (344). Almost every woman Ringelheim has interviewed about their Holocaust experiences 'referred to the humiliating feelings and experiences surrounding her entrance to [Auschwitz]... being nude, being shaved all over – for some being shaved in a sexual stance, straddling two stools; being observed by men, both fellow prisoners and SS guards' (1993: 376). The selection of women for gassing because their breasts sagged cannot be rationalised by stating that to the Nazis, older women were expendable; these were young girls who might equally be selected if their thin appearance, their 'evident lack of femininity', gave offence to the Nazis (Fénelon 1977: 158). Clearly a sexual element pervaded selections: Pravda wonders caustically why 'three well-dressed gentleman... looking like bank directors', from the Krupp organisation, had to have their prospective women workers parade naked (Appendix VI: 96). Salt remembers how women were used for sexual recreation: 'Sometimes at rollcalls they would tell us to strip, and the SS would run around with whips and beat us up' (Appendix VIII: 121). Biber states that 'It gave them [the SS] pleasure [...] to have hundreds of women parading in the nude all the time' (Appendix II: 22). She remembers that specifically young girls were picked out at a punishment *appell* in Plaszow camp for 'twenty-five lashes on the bare skin' (21). Perl remembers 'a new kind of "selection", in which the young, the pretty, the well-built were pulled out'; in reality, they were taken for blood transfusions (1992: 73-4). Ehrlich was likewise forced to give blood. Behind her account of this, as behind Perl's fearfulness, was the doubt that the laws forbidding the Germans sexual connection with Jews could hold. Vera Laska believes the reasons these laws did hold, by and large, were pragmatic: the SS man feared losing his 'sinecure with power' and being 'shipped to the Russian front'; the women inmates were 'unattractive, without hair, dirty, smelly'; the 'SS guards had a better selection of sexual partners among their own kind' or they had the camp brothels (1983: 26). As Judith Magyar Isaacson points out, none of this allayed women's fears (1991: 44, 53, 61), the dread that Ehrlich experienced, marched off on her own at night to an unknown destination. When she states that "it wasn't what I thought it was going to be' (Appendix IV: 44) she articulates both the fear of real-ising "it" by naming it, and the lack of *need* to name this universal terror. There were, in any case, many ways of sexually terrorising women without violating race laws; the "punishment" beatings at Plaszow are one example. Brunstein recalls how a particular guard, 'a very perverse animal', would tell the young girls about his sexual experiences, 'even that corpses are also a form of enjoyment to him. This we were subject



to listen to. And he used to like us [to] say how we enjoyed it or could we tell him something about ourselves' (Appendix III: 32). Brunstein was then sixteen.

It is not only within women's accounts that sexual terrorisation is minimised. Claims by influential writers such as Kogon that women prostitutes "Apart from a very few exceptions... were resigned to their fate with rather little restraint' (Kogon, 1998, 135) meet with few challenges, even though Cohen suggests that fear of near-certain annihilation in concentration camp drove women to "volunteer": one stated: "Rather half a year in a brothel than half a year in a concentration camp"<sup>5</sup>. They appear to have believed the Nazis' promises that they would be released after six months<sup>6</sup>. That male prisoner-workers who had access to women's camps extorted sex from women on a regular basis is well attested in women's narratives (Perl, 1992: 57, 78, 90; Lengyel, 1995: 61; Fénelon, 18, 105); soon after the liberation of Belsen, Perl records, the male prisoners were buying sexual favours for food (182). The prisoner who grooms Lengyel for prostitution tells her: "In this misery and excitement we need [women] more than in normal life. Women are cheap enough" (1995: 61). The myth of diminished eros – perpetuated by critics such as Rosenfeld – scarcely takes into account that there existed numbers of relatively privileged male inmates with access to the women's camp who did exploit women in this way (Cohen, 1988: 135).

After liberation, women were no longer offered the dubious protection of the Nazi race laws. Sternberg Newman records Russians raping eighty-year-olds – 'Even old women were raped ten or twenty times' – and children – 'they got a special kick out of little girls – from eight to thirteen years old' (1978: 97). One ex-concentration camp inmate was raped fifteen times (115). Pravda and her friend, escaping from the death-march, narrowly escaped rape (Appendix VII: 104-5).

### **3.6.7 Punishment: the negation of gender**

Ofer and Weitzman, among others, emphasise that 'Most Jews believed – at least in the beginning – that the Germans were "civilized" and would honor traditional gender norms and would not harm women and children' (1998: 5). Because of this, men fled while women were left behind; Brunstein's father, a prominent member of the Polish Bund, fled Lodz after the arrest of his brother, a political journalist; Brunstein's elder brother fled to Russia. She and her mother were left alone with her younger brother (Appendix III: 28). Biber's brother fled Poland with his uncle, who left a wife and four children (Appendix II: 18). At first it did seem that only men were in danger. Baneth's father was captured in a random roundup in Prostejov when she was fifteen; later the family were issued with a death

certificate for him from Auschwitz (Appendix I: 2). Ehrlich's Czech father was imprisoned for listening to BBC broadcasts. He was beaten in front of his family: 'They [the Gestapo] grabbed my father and said, "Your name?" and he said, "Ernstanto." He [the officer] said "Jew Ernstanto" and hit him... I adored my father – I was sitting like absolutely struck by lightning. I didn't cry, I didn't make a scene, I was frozen, completely frozen' (Appendix IV: 38).

Brunstein states, however, that 'It did not take us long to feel that this is a war... against us as a civil population, as civilians' (Appendix III: 28). Christopher R. Browning tracks the escalation of the killing activities of a particular battalion of Polish Order Police between July 23 and August 31, 1941 from male Jews only to executing women and children; by early October 'the need to explain the shooting of Jewish women was no longer felt' (1998: 16). Similarly, cultural taboos against physical and capital punishment for women were swiftly overturned. Spier, as well as Biber, remembers women being beaten in Plaszow: "'25 on the naked arse" (that [was] how it was called), and this with a whip. I've seen in the Ambulatorium (First Aid station) a woman lying, this part of her body was swollen, purple and black' (Appendix IX: 125). In Auschwitz a woman was beaten for being last out of her barrack for rollcall: 'the Sturmfuehrer... made her kneel down, told her to lift her arms and placed in each hand one brick, then a second, then a third; she could not hold her arms up and dropped them a little. The SS man beat her ferociously, put more stones on, the arms dropped again, he beat her until she was lying in a pool of blood and she was taken away'. Shortly afterwards Spier and her barrack-mates, accused of being too noisy, endured a 'penalty' rollcall, 'on the knees upon the gravel. Several SS men came along to see this comedy and they had great fun' (126).

Rudolph Hoess is scornful of women SS; these 'flustered hens' were largely ineffective, and 'which of my officers would be willing to take his orders from a woman?' (1995: 137-8). Women prisoners, designated "criminal" ("green triangle") or "asocial" ("black triangle") had daily charge of the inmates, under male supervision; in order to retain such positions of privilege, women kapos had to learn to hit like men, or else find some method of deceiving their male overseers, at risk to themselves. Salt remembers a Czech kapo, who 'used to walk up and down with a whip and she used to say, "I am small but I can hit very, very hard"... could she hit. Could she' (Appendix VIII: 120). The kapos at her labour camp 'had to pretend that they were bad, and they're shouting' but 'you could get worse kapos' (121). Many inmates testify to the gratuitous cruelty and sadism of women SS guards such as Irma Graese (Perl, 1992: 61-2; Ehrlich, Appendix IV: 48). Ehrlich describes the German guards – male and female – as 'sadistic. [...] It was quite clear that this was almost a hysteria on their part... They went that far that they had to go further, there was no way back for them' (50). Brunstein, too, encountered female cruelty; when a woman guard squashed a large frog which crawled out from a bombed building 'she said, "This is what I



would like to do to all of you", and laughed. [...] It's only a frog, but it illustrates quite a lot'. The women guards she encountered were not necessarily more cruel than men but were 'certainly very cruel' (Appendix III: 32). She remembers the 'greeting' of an Auschwitz *blockaltëste*: 'she said, "You have all come here to die, and I myself will be instrumental to bring this about", and as she was saying it she was walking around with a big stick... just hitting us over our heads, just like that, for fun' (31). A male guard in Hanover, 'one of the most vicious characters [...] that I have ever come across throughout', greeted the women 'by saying [...] that we have not come to a *pension* [...], if we wanted to get back to Poland we could only go back through the sky. [...] He took out a cane and said, "This is my... translator and he speaks all languages. [...] I do not advise you to come into contact with him and for the very slightest disobedience you will come into contact with him."' (32). Sybil Milton (Ofer and Weitzman, 1993: 225) finds the behaviour of the women guards sharply divided: 'Several women were notorious for their cruelty; they seemed to engage in a bizarre rivalry emulating the excesses and brutalities of their male superiors. Other women guards tried to mitigate the worst extremes'. Perhaps Ehrlich most accurately describes the desperate recognition of some women that they possessed no other resources for survival than joining the hierarchy:

The overseers in the block were voluntary and there, I first time came to the conclusion that people actually are divided into the ones who give their services and co-operate because they want to save their life and will crawl over the corpses, or the others who have enough strength to save their life otherwise than by crawling over the corpses and they didn't give their services free (Appendix IV: 43).

She presents a correlative to Levi's contention that 'it is likely that a certain degree of man's domination over man is inscribed in our generic patrimony' (1989: 30). The notion that such a 'patrimony' can seamlessly incorporate women under its aegis is as open to challenge as any universalising theory of the Holocaust. Lacking the testimony of a prominent woman guard such as Irma Graese, hanged after the war, it is impossible to trace the evolution of a woman from, perhaps, someone as unexceptional as the labour camp guard interviewed by Alison Owings to one like Graese. Frau Ilse Fest, Owings records, was "'drafted to watch over foreign work forces"' (1995: 317) after being injured in an industrial accident. The position turned out to be a guard in Ravensbrück. When attempting to object to the beating a male guard was giving a new arrival she was told by another female guard: "'Obviously, you are tired of living. Stay seated if you can and look away. You have no idea how many of your kind who have rebelled are already prisoners themselves"' (318). Fest spent the remainder of the war as a guard in labour camps; prisoners' testimonies examined by Owings support her own account of herself as not brutal; indeed, behaving as benignly towards the prisoners as her own severely limited authority permitted (323-6).

### 3.6.8 Resisting the loss of identity

Women frequently maintained religious rituals and birthday celebrations; these preserved memories of lives prior to incarceration. Fantasy – which many male narrators condemn as futile – among women played a vital role in allowing them to re-enter in imagination their previous roles, and to plan a future.

Pravda, for instance, remembers two birthday celebrations, more symbolic than actual: a theatre ticket found in her friend Vera's pocket on her mother's birthday is interpreted to her as 'a greeting from her mother and a good omen'. On her own birthday, 'Lying under the table I am singing *The life is only a chance* and Stela Gráfová, who is lying next to me, is giving me a birthday present: it's half a carrot – the last bit of food she has' (Appendix VII: 98). Garbasz-Zimet's sister 'sliced my quarter loaf into thin slices, and decorated them with something colourful such as the greens from our soup, and that was my birthday cake' (Appendix V: 75).

Many uses of fantasy are recorded in women's narratives (see chapter 1, p. 11). Ehrlich remembers how "cooking" – a widespread subject of women's fantasy – became so totally absorbing to her work-gang, standing for hours in conditions too cold to dig, that two women almost came to blows over the number of eggs in a cake. The menus for their imaginary dinner parties were 'elaborate and five-star'. For her, these were 'a substitute for eating... you feel less hungry' (Appendix IV: 45). Pravda, while digging 'that silly trench... embarked with my group on a course of history of art' to pass the time: 'It went right up to the beginning of the 17th century, until the Russians came too close' (Appendix VII: 106). With hospitality nothing more than boiled water, starving, huddled in coats to keep warm, Brunstein and her friends in Lodz met to discuss literature; even in these conditions 'we managed to have compassion for characters in literature' and 'talk of the time when the war will end' (Appendix III: 28). In her labour camp, the women did the same. 'It was all important because it helped you [...] to keep some sense of sanity and to know that there is a world outside' (32). Ehrlich recalls 'spinning dreams' with her friends: 'what will we do when the war finishes, where will we go, whom will we see first, will our parents come home, will our brothers and sisters come back, what plans will we have after the war?' (Appendix IV: 51). By contrast, Levi and his friends deliberately discontinued contacts which recalled the past:

We Italians had decided to meet every Sunday evening in a corner of the Lager, but we stopped it at once, because it was too sad to count the numbers and find fewer each time, and to see each other ever more deformed and squalid. And it was so tiring to walk those few steps and then, meeting each other, to remember and to think. It was better not to think (1987: 43).

Much has been written about the rich cultural life of the ghettos. Whether or not this represented a deliberate strategy of the Germans to pacify the Jews (Young, 1990: 34), it was a means whereby they could retain their cultural identity. Baneth helped to costume



*Aida*, in which her mother sang (Appendix I: 3); Ehrlich remembers the 'absolutely unique' art which flourished in Theresienstadt, organised by the composers, conductors and musicians deported to the ghetto. Theatre workshops were established, music was composed, plays adapted. Satire was 'one of the most important' elements; its humour 'escaped the Germans and this [...] of course kept the spirit of all the inhabitants so high' (40).

Ehrlich represents herself as attended throughout incarceration by what she terms her 'survival kit' which she describes as 'extra sensory perception... a whiff of a laser that came even from right to left through your mind'; she maintains this did not emanate from her own thoughts. It aided her to 'relax... see what happens next... don't be afraid, do as you're told' (Appendix IV: 41). She holds that this sense is responsible for saving her life in Belsen, pushing her beyond her strength in order to find help for herself (49). Altered states of consciousness, between apathy (Baneth, Appendix I: 5; Brunstein, Appendix III: 31) and the heightened awareness Ehrlich experienced, are typical: 'As psychologists dealing with long-term damage suffered by former inmates... have repeatedly confirmed, memory... fluctuates between amnesia and hypermnesia, forgotten details and overly clear images' (Reiter, 2000: 157). Sometimes, reminders of normal life could induce agonising self-awareness. Baneth and her colleagues, certain they were being taken for extermination, wept at the music of the camp orchestra, 'not because we were going to the gas chambers [but with] the emotion of normal listening [to] normal music' which reminded them of their past. In that dire moment 'suddenly humanity came back to us'; 'That was such a barbaric thing of the Germans to do... to make you feel even more humiliated' (Appendix I: 9). Yet later that day, leaving Auschwitz alive and seeing fields through the open boxcar door, travelling with her mother and friends to a labour camp 'I think when I was freed in Bergen Belsen I didn't feel so free like this moment the train turned outward from Auschwitz... If you win today a million in the lottery it wouldn't have meant so much' (11).

This spontaneous re-encountering one's self is often – as Baneth found – more of a freeing moment than actual liberation, which many women attest meant scarcely anything. By then, often the women had suffered too much. The passage where Baneth recalls the day before her mother became fatally ill with typhoid – they walk in a meadow near Belsen, gather marguerites and plan their return home – is one of the most wrenchingly poignant in all these narratives. 'My mother took [a marguerite] and made the joke, "I love you, I love you not." [...] And suddenly we in this moment [...] realised that we are free, being on a meadow on our own, seeing flowers and do how [...] it pleases us' (12-13).

Such shifts between blunted and heightened awareness could, as Ehrlich found, be devastating for women's sense of identity. Ehrlich, resting for an illicit moment from carrying tree-trunks to a sawmill, saw 'the others pass by, the four and four and four

carrying the trees. And for the first time I saw what we looked like and I thought, God, is this what we look like? This is what we do? That's terrible. It's unbelievable. And two minutes later you put the tree on your shoulder and off you go' (Appendix IV: 45).

One of the most vexed questions of Holocaust scholarship is what constitutes resistance to atrocity: can it be as basic as surviving, retaining one's identity; adherence to some moral code, as Frankl maintains? Ringelheim warns that 'slippage in language', by which everything from survival to suicide become defined as resistance, neutralises and destroys the term. For her, the 'common feminist position' that '[s]urvival is resistance' is inadequate. 'Certain values, described as feminine virtues, may get some women through' but they did not offer women 'the resources for fighting the enemy... Manipulation of the system is not resistance, even though it can mean survival'. She asks, 'Do women know more about the manipulation of systems than about resistance to systems?'. Yet If survival itself is seen as resistance, and if there is a relationship between such manipulation and survival, she suggests that 'we may end up with the notion that armed or active resistance is not a priority or that it stands on equal footing with living through the Holocaust in any way possible' (Rittner and Roth (eds.) 1993: 390).

None of these ordinary women imprisoned purely on racial grounds undertook organised resistance work. Pravda, newly arrived at Auschwitz, remembers her impulse to shoot an SS guard who killed a girl begging for food: 'He had a second pistol at his belt and I thought, now I take this pistol off his belt and shoot him. You know, that fury. And then came this Czech commonsense telling me if I shoot him, not only I but a thousand women behind me will be executed' (Appendix VI: 94). The history of the Holocaust is one of draconian retaliation for far more trivial offences: In Plaszow, on one evening, over fifty men were executed for smuggling small amounts of food (Biber, Appendix II: 21).

Levi, among countless others, reminds us that Jews, men and women, had almost no opportunity for organised resistance:

In camps with a majority of Jews, like those in the Auschwitz area, an active or passive defense was particularly difficult. Here the prisoners were, for the most part, devoid of any kind of organizational or military experience. They came from every country in Europe, spoke different languages, and, as a result, could not understand one another. They were more starved, weaker and more exhausted than the others because their living conditions were harsher and because they had a long history of hunger, persecution and humiliation in the ghettos. The final consequences of this were that the length of their stays in the camp was tragically brief (1987: 388).

Yehuda Bauer suggests other reasons why effective group resistance was problematic. Primarily, the concept of annihilation was inconceivable. Practically, a lack of support from local populations, a lack of weapons and trained men, prevented open rebellion; when the Jews did know that transportation meant death the closeness of the Jewish family meant that young people refused to abandon their parents and husbands their wives. By this time



in any case, ghetto life had weakened them; it had also further limited their means to resist. Retaliation by the Nazis was also a strong deterrent. (1982: 245-8). Ezrahi argues that 'a primary task that the Nazis had set for themselves' was to 'fracture... undermine' or 'simply destroy' the Jewish communities' 'moral and spiritual fabric' by '[making] the death of one Jew the price of the survival of another' (1982: 109). As Pravda states, ultimately the Nazis' deception 'explains this perpetual question, how is it possible that these people went like sheep to their deaths? We went like sheep who were not told about the slaughterhouse'. There was 'no way except suicide' to oppose the genocide: 'You could not do a thing. So heroism doesn't come into it. The heroism is in the optimism of endurance and saying, "I'm going to stick it out" [...] with a smile and not hysterics and not weeping and not crying' (Appendix VI: 94).

Ehrlich witnessed the futility of the 'fantastic resistance' put up by the women with her, clearly aware that showers could mean gassing: 'They refused to go in, screaming and fighting... They were beaten up, pushed in, the door closed and water came'. For her, these women were simply 'hysterical': 'blissfully ignorant as I was I thought, oh, so what? Why not? Shower is a shower. I could see on the top of the ceiling were lines of pipes, this way, that way; on every crossing or every junction were the sprays and I thought, well, they said it's showers, it looks like showers, it must be showers' (Appendix IV: 42). Ignorance is represented as an essential ingredient of Ehrlich's psychological survival kit – the old saying "ignorance is bliss" was positively saving me from the disaster'; 'knowledge is a burden because it's fear' (41), it 'drags you down... [it] will weaken you and you have very little chance' (50). She repressed the deaths of her mother and sister for most of her incarceration. Told by another inmate that her mother had been gassed, Ehrlich states that 'I simply put it down that the man has been here too long and he went mad. So I said, "Oh yes, probably."... And I didn't take any notice, absolutely not. Just shows you that [the] human mind is not capable of assimilating this kind of information without any preliminary reference [...], and I thought, he is mad and I'm normal, goodbye, and dismissed him' (43).

The resistance of inmates in the BIIb Family Camp who after months in Auschwitz knew they were to be gassed is documented. Baneth's relations were in this consignment. She remembers the trickery to which the Nazis resorted: 'They were telling them, "You are not going in the gas chambers, you are going to another working camp"'. Baneth recalls that 'They were all saying, "We know we will die but we won't make it easy for them, we have to die anyway so we will put up a fight; so they shoot us, so they beat us to death, what's the difference?" And that [was] actually what happened'. The night afterwards, Baneth heard 'terrible screaming, noises, dogs, [the] whole night, they really did put up a big fight... we heard shooting. In the end they did take them to Auschwitz'. Later on she was told this group sang before they died, '[playing] it up to the Germans that they couldn't care less what they are doing to them. [...] They were gassed, all of them' (Appendix I, 8). Danuta

Czech broadly confirms this. She adds that 'The women who are already in the gas chamber... sing the "Internationale", the "Hatikva", at the time the Jewish national hymn, and the Czech national anthem, and a partisans' song. Towards morning, 3,791 Jewish prisoners from Theresienstadt – men, women, and children – are killed in crematoriums II and III' (1997: 595). Martin Gilbert records another such instance, when a Polish woman 'made a very short but fiery speech' in the gas chamber, condemning Nazism and exhorting the *Sonderkommando* to testify "'that we went to meet our death in full consciousness and with pride'"<sup>7</sup>. When their own time came for gassing – six months after arrival was the maximum they believed they would live – members of Baneth's own transport planned to set fire to their barracks; they began to collect scraps of paper. Others advocated escape. Their dissent epitomises the desperate dilemma as to what might be the most effective means of resistance in a situation where resistance was impossible. When, around this time, there was an escape from Auschwitz main camp, Baneth remembers 'we had two days standing *appell* in punishment. People were beaten, people were hanged... purely to frighten everybody' (Appendix I: 8).

She attempts to describe the indescribable: saying goodbye to her young aunt, twenty-eight and newly married, the night before she was to be gassed: 'I was holding her very tightly and I remember feeling [...] when you're tight to somebody [...] her heart [beating] and I thought [to] myself, tomorrow that heart won't beat any more. Today if I talk about it it sounds absolutely– that you could even think a thing like that and be accepting it' (8). In any consideration of what it might have meant to resist, the paradox inherent in this statement must be borne in mind. Prior to incarceration, as Pravda states, most Jews were unable to comprehend the reality of mass extermination, of gas chambers, despite the rumours that 'there are extermination camps or there is something very horrid about [Auschwitz]' (Appendix VI: 94). Inside Auschwitz itself, even when Ehrlich's informer 'pointed through the door to a column of flames and said, "That's where [your mother] is now"' (Appendix IV: 43), this fact was too fantastic to be grasped. Brunstein remembers her ghetto discussion group's fear that 'when the war will end... no-one will believe us'; this was in relation to the lesser horrors of ghetto existence (Appendix III: 29). After the Holocaust 'it was so, because no-one believed us when we came out' (35). Testifying to atrocity became for many survivors their central reason to live; a form of resistance in itself. As Salt states poignantly: 'My voice will still be on tape, won't it? A consolation' (Appendix VIII: 123).



### 3.6.9 Reconstructing identities

For these women, Ringelheim's question, how do survivors deal with the ghastly disappointment of their lives after the Holocaust, has haunted them constantly. They represent their afterlives as a process of reaching an accommodation with displacement, poverty, interrupted education, an alien language; with ill-health and above all with bereavement. That few people have wanted to listen to their narratives has been an added grief.

After an unsettled spell in Czechoslovakia, held back in her job as a teacher of tailoring because of Communist distrust of Jews, Baneth married a Hungarian, with his own horror story of surviving as an unarmed Jewish conscript in the Hungarian army. Fond as she was of a gentile boy she nevertheless felt that 'my surviving meant to me I am the only person who can carry on the family and it must be a Jewish family'. She and her husband moved to Hungary, first of all living with her mother-in-law, then in a flat with their baby. In 1956 came the revolution: 'We had on our flat [...] a big *mogen Dovid* outside, [and] written in Hungarian, "This time, Jew, we won't send you to Auschwitz, we do it to you here." Ten years after the war and I'm starting off all over again' (Appendix I: 14). They settled in England, Baneth knowing no English. 'It meant to start from scratch all over again, that was the third time... Sometimes I was very bitter about it all' (15).

Biber, who contracted tuberculosis in Plaszow, has a pension 'only for my loss of health, not for robbing us of freedom, for deporting us' (Appendix II: 25). She has also been robbed of children. 'I never mentioned it to anybody but I desperately tried to have a family'. Because of the TB she was unable to do so. 'And then I suddenly noticed a gland this side of my ear [...], it's all the time something' (24). Salt states: 'After the war I had a nervous breakdown and I had ulcers, a hiatus hernia, a very bad back'. With wry humour she adds: 'Other than that I'm all right' (Appendix VIII: 122). She 'had nightmares for years. [...] Even now I sometimes have nightmares about it. You can't forget it' (123).

Menial work was often all that was available in England, where grudging acceptance best describes the attitude of officialdom. Perhaps because of this, work could be exploitive. The landlady of Biber's flat in London's East End 'made this condition that I had to clean the stairs from top to bottom every fortnight and however I did it she wasn't [...] satisfied until finally I decided that I can't carry on. I used to do it with tears' (Appendix II: 24). Obtaining a City and Guilds certificate in dressmaking, she eventually opened her own shop. The dental practice where Brunstein was given work offered her training as a dental technician. The Home Office refused; they would grant her only a domestic's work permit. 'I regretted it that after having been through what I had been through, and being willing [...] and well enough to work, I was not allowed to work' (Appendix III: 35).

The psychological scarring is more insidious for being less visible. For Biber, 'I would say [fear] is still in the system. [...] I don't like remote places. I can't bear silence... I don't like to go to places where I can't see houses, people. I [...] have to be with people'. Work 'helped me to recover [...], to adjust myself because I didn't have time to think. Now since we retired I have too much time to think' (Appendix II: 24).

Informed in May 1945 of the death of her husband Saša, Pravda, who had recovered from her incarceration so far as to obtain work as a civil servant and attend social evenings, became deeply depressed. The last immediate post-war entry in her diary, for November 1945, expresses both her intention to commit suicide and her will, disposing of a pitifully small trove of possessions. The Epilogue, written in 1996, records simply: 'No, I did not manage it' (Appendix VII: 116). Spier, told that she was the sole survivor of a family of seven, was 'inconsolable... in deep apathy'; she 'went on strike with everything, did not want food nor did I want to go out. My friends watched me closely that I did not do myself any harm'. She mourned her own appearance: 'When I saw myself in the mirror I felt so awful, that... I cried pitifully... I was emaciated like a skeleton, so that I was afraid of myself'. As with Biber, work saved her: 'I worked with little pieces of leather which had been given to me and I made various flowers and bouquets... Shortly afterwards I received letters thanking me, [telling me] how pleased people had been with my work'. This craft became a cottage industry. Spier, working from her bed, sold the flowers with the help of a Stockholm woman; with the money she received, she bought fruit for her roommates, at this time her surrogate family. The work was 'a sedative and it restored some of my self-assurance' (Appendix IX: 128).

On arrival at Auschwitz Pravda remembers the inmates shouting to her transport that the young women should give their babies to older ones: 'they really wanted to save people... [The women] didn't understand why; it came out that any woman holding a baby was sent into the gas immediately. They [the prisoners] were tearing the babies away from the mothers and giving [them] to older women' (Appendix VI: 94). Young mothers with Brunstein made blind choices; when their babies were taken from them by the Germans they snatched them back and joined them in the line for gassing 'and [the attitude was] if you want to go, no-one is stopping you' (Appendix III: 31). The most horrifying choice of all haunted the unnamed woman whom Baneth met afterwards in Prague; Baneth witnessed her knowingly surrender her baby at a selection in Auschwitz to save her own life, the only woman in the group to do so. 'I'll never forget her embarrassment, the apology to me to explain why she did it and how she did it... and how terribly she suffered constantly with the conscience'. The woman's desperate hope paid off: her husband survived, they were reunited, 'they will have children again together and [in] the end she thinks she did do the right thing because she's now alive and she can give another child life again'. Yet 'what a terrible situation life can bring you, and in what dilemma mothers had to be, [to] choose



between my life or my baby's or having my life taken with my baby. Did she do right or wrong? Who can judge?' (Appendix I: 13). Only the survivors can speak for the women who died simply for being mothers. Brunstein states that 'So many of the young people I knew, the young mothers I knew, they did not survive simply because they went with their babies' (Appendix III: 34). Holocaust survivor Roman Frister suggests that we should be wary about evaluating inmates' behaviour by absolute moral standards external to the Holocaust: 'how can the acts of a time of blackness be judged by the values of a time of light?' (1999: 385). The complete inversion of cultural norms is exemplified by Salt, waiting for selection with other ghetto inmates: 'The situation was such that a young woman was sitting near to us, she kept saying how lucky she is and how happy she is, so people said to her, "Look, what are you so happy [about] today, who's happy today?" And she said, "I am. My baby died a few months ago, and he's buried here and no-one can take him away from me."' (Appendix VIII: 119). Frister's objectivity is perhaps intellectual rather than emotional: Baneth continues to condemn herself for saving her mother only to suffer for another eighteen months (Appendix I: 16). Similarly Salt, twelve when her nine year-old sister was selected, states that 'never for one minute of the day or night can I forget it. I sort of have a guilty feeling that they got hold of her and not me' (Appendix VIII: 119). The way in which these atrocities were committed – to instruct parents to hand over their children, or to trick them – appears particularly calculated to haunt survivors. Biber remembers the constant terror in which Plaszow's hidden children lived, concealed in the bunks 'like sardines' while their parents worked (Appendix II: 20). When the Germans discovered some of the children 'in a very nice way [they] announced that a nursery will be arranged... the people should give up the children, put them in the nursery while they're working, the children will be looked after'. A few weeks afterwards a special afternoon *appell* was called: 'Every time we heard the word *appell* during the day we know something terrible is going to happen'. A lorry appeared, bearing the terrified children. Next to Biber, a woman heard her twin girls screaming. "'Mother, mother", they cried, "They are going to take us away" [...] and they did. Those children disappeared' (21). Garbasz-Zimet remembers the birth of a child in her labour camp to a woman whose pregnancy had not been apparent when she arrived at Auschwitz. The female camp commandant 'was pleased with this baby, and called him Peter, and made sure that they received more food' (Appendix V: 74). Such actions were pitifully rare: Goeth's was the norm. These women state that the loss of children was the worst grief of all. In Belsen after liberation Brunstein met a woman she knew from Lodz:

When she saw me she broke down and she said, "Here I am Ester [...], [Hela] is dead and [Sonja] is dead and the war is over and I'm alive... but I won't be alive because I had strength to go on before and now I have no more strength and I don't want to get even the strength [...], it's too painful", and she did not last very long, and this happens to very many, especially to mothers who have lost children. It's very hard if you lose a parent at a young age but I think it's almost unbearable if you lose a young child or any child (Appendix III: 34).



Baneth's mental walling-off of memories is demolished by every family celebration. 'I completely blocked it up... that was the only way, when I think back... how to carry on with life, put to it a stop in your brain and from now on I am starting to live a life, and that is how I carried on nearly forty, fifty years'. When, however, 'My son had his wedding, his bar mitzvah, there was no family whatsoever'; the guests were 'always just friends [...], and that [is] what is missing. This is how the Holocaust affects the second and third generation. There you can see the whole of the missing'. This is 'what we [the survivors] have all in common, they will [all] tell you [...], when it comes to one of those weddings, bar mitzvahs, there is the hole so obvious'. Her son has scarcely talked to her about the Holocaust, and then only about his own reaction to visiting Yad Vashem; when he was young there never seemed a right time to tell him. He learned the significance of her tattoo from 'newspapers and other things'. With her grandchildren, she wonders 'what's [...] right or wrong, to talk or not to talk? I think it's not right to poison them with things like that... it's good for them to know, but can they understand?' (Appendix I: 15).

Strangers have thought Biber's tattoo is her telephone number. 'I have friends that I've known for over forty years, nobody ever asked me what happened to you, where have you been. It's one of those things one never had a chance to talk about'. Not until visiting Theresienstadt with a woman of over ninety did she unburden herself: 'she was the only one, she said, "Please tell me about yourself." And that I thought was wonderful. And we walked and we walked round in Theresienstadt and she really listened with interest. [...] It helped me' (Appendix II: 25). Baneth has found that the English, unlike the Germans or Italians, ignore her tattoo: they 'look and do like they don't see it and never mention it' (Appendix I: 15). After all her struggles to adapt, she feels that England is 'the only country where I belong' yet 'when I mix with other people I don't fit in and that won't change'.

It is as if before all else, she belongs to a state whose inhabitants are the survivors:

There come certain points which we [survivors] all have found out, that we really are not belonging to those countries which we came from, and that we don't have a belonging nowhere... We never can be English, even if we live just like people here... Each story [was] different. Each suffering [was] different... Each carries one sorrow we all have, remembering all those we have lost (15).

### 3. 7. In conclusion

These women's testimonies have furnished many examples of the ways in which women suffered the different horrors detailed in chapter 1 of this thesis. Their gender forced them into experiences men could not share: motherhood, sexual abuse. In many situations their gender led them to attempt to organise their incarceration in ways different from men. Primarily, in terms of the examination of Holocaust fiction which will form the



remainder of this thesis, they represent incarceration from a different, gendered perspective. It is with reference to this that the subsequent fictions will be evaluated.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Smith and Watson (1992: xvii) cite Spivak, G. C., *Harper's Magazine*, September 1989, p. 52.

<sup>2</sup> Friedman (Smith and Watson (eds.) 1998: 72) cites Gusdorf, G. "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography", 1956, tr. James Olney, in Olney, *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, Princeton University Press, 1972, 28-48.

<sup>3</sup> Baumel (1998: 150) cites Doneson, J. E. "The Jew as a Female Figure in Holocaust Film", *Shoah* 1, 1 (1978) pp. 11-13, 18).

<sup>4</sup> In striking contrast to male testimony in general, Vera Schiff (1996: 98-9) describes one man's transformation of his Theresienstadt bunk into 'a model of normality and civility in this abysmal place'.

<sup>5</sup> Cohen (1988: 83) quotes from the testimony of Dr. Rascher a physician engaged in medical experiments, who had questioned a former Ravensbrück inmate as to why she had volunteered as a prostitute (*Trials of War Criminals before the Nürnberg Military Tribunals under Control Council Law No. 10*, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, Vol. I p. 245).

<sup>6</sup> In all probability, as Günter Grau (1995: 14-15) suggests, they were gassed; it is often 'impossible to be more precise' about the fate of such women.

<sup>7</sup> Gilbert (1987: 636) quotes from the manuscript of an unknown *Sonderkommando* member, discovered on the site of Crematorium III in 1952 (Bezwinska, J. and Czech, D. (eds.), "The Manuscript", *Amidst a Nightmare of Crime: Manuscripts of Members of Sonderkommando*, Auschwitz-Oswiecim 1973, pp.114-5).



## Chapter 4

### ILONA KARMEL: *AN ESTATE OF MEMORY*

#### 4. 1 Selection of material

This and the chapter following will examine in some depth the novels *An Estate of Memory* by Ilona Karmel and *Anyia* by Susan Fromberg Schaeffer. The choice of these particular works was influenced by two main considerations. Firstly, both novels intersect with the survivors' testimonies examined earlier. Secondly, both can be said consciously to gender the experience of incarceration. Both are examples of what Lillian Kremer terms 'feminist Holocaust writing' (1999: 38). Karmel's is grounded in experience – she survived the Plaszow camp, where Hertha Spier and Tauba Biber were incarcerated, the Skarzysko-Kamienna labour camp and Buchenwald – while Fromberg Schaeffer's emerged from extensive research among survivors; for Kremer, it represents a 'meticulous recreation of prewar European middle-class Jewish life' of 'enormous breadth' (1999: 148). Both elaborate upon many elements of women's testimonies to 'advance the major theme of women's resourcefulness' (1999: 38), the fictional form freeing its narrators self-consciously to reflect on their own experiences as *women* in a manner less readily available to the women examined in the last chapter.

In his overview essay "The Holocaust in Fiction", Harry James Cargas examines twenty-eight works of literature, poetry and plays. He discusses two volumes of women's poetry, one poetry anthology edited by a woman, one play and no fiction (Friedman (ed.), 1993: 533-45). In his bibliography the proportion of women writers is higher than James Young's or Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi's: of the forty-two works, five are by women, one is jointly written with a male writer and one has a woman editor (545-6). Kremer believes that there is a 'near absence of representations of women's gender-related Holocaust experience' in works which suggest a canon (1999:3); 'Treatises by prominent male critics have, more often than not, relegated all but a small segment of women's Holocaust writing to the periphery, when not consigning it to invisibility' (4). While this may be the case, women's Holocaust fiction is itself sparse. The bibliographies of James E. Young and Ezrahi reveal a startling gender imbalance; Young cites over two hundred works of fiction and imaginative literature, Ezrahi over a hundred and twenty. In both, just over an eighth are by women. Marlene Heinemann cites fewer than fifty works by women; most are survivors' testimonies.

Both Fromberg Schaeffer and Karmel reverse the marginalisation and stereotyping of women which critics find typical of male fictions (Kremer, 1999: 5; Heinemann, 1986: 2; Horowitz in Baskin (ed.) 1994: 263). Fromberg Schaeffer's sole narrator is female; Ilona Karmel's narrative alternates between omniscient narrative and the free indirect thought of four women. Male voices are thus mediated by women. Both novels focus on the importance of bonding, Karmel via the "camp family", Fromberg Schaeffer upon the desperate resourcefulness of a mother striving to preserve the life of her child. *Anya* exemplifies the prewar antisemitism and the horrors of ghettoisation – including the selection of family members – to be found in the women's testimony in the chapter previously; in particular it charts the intensification of terror which all record. Anya's initiation into Auschwitz – the ritual humiliations of stripping, disinfection and shaving – are a distillation of all the women's experiences. Both novels document the especial hell of heavy manual labour for untrained and starving women. Both narrators are from roughly the same middle-class backgrounds as the women whose testimonies were examined in the previous chapter. Jewish by custom, assimilated, they echo the divided racial and cultural identities of Hana Pravda and Edith Baneth. Karmel's characters reflect her own diverse cultural background in Cracow: her family contained both 'ultra-Orthodox Hasidim and Bundists, traditionalists... and modern professionals' (Kremer, 1999: 31).

These fictions, then, are atypical of the male fictions which have gained more general critical notice, a sample of which will be examined in chapter 6. They refute the stereotypical conflation of gender with biology predominant in male writing – even the non-fictional – seeing gender as informing almost all aspects of women's experiences of the Holocaust. Sexism, German or Jewish, which exposed women to additional suffering<sup>1</sup>, is not naturalised, as in much male writing; instead it becomes the point of focus. These novels also examine ways in which women identified and exploited male stereotyping to aid survival.

Hilary Lips states that 'Stereotyping and prejudice involve dynamic processes, not just static collections of beliefs and evaluations. People who lack power and who are victims of prejudice actually develop qualities that are due to the prejudice and serve, in a self-fulfilling way, to reinforce it' (1997: 3-4). The identities of both novels' central characters reflect the sexism inherent in their cultures. In both, the women's gendering is also the site of their strengths. Their home-making and in particular their maternal skills are represented as preserving life. In Karmel's novel the primacy of patriarchy and the corresponding lack of positive maternal role models render women less able to maintain their "camp family". However, Karmel's characters are incarcerated for longer, and subjected to greater privations. Kremer claims that when first published in 1969 the novel was 'at variance with the pathos and redemptive mode many Americans readers crave', educated on the 'sanitized' Anne Frank (35), who, Tim Cole claims, is disallowed the pessimism expressed in her own diary and 'only speaks optimistically of an enduring belief in human goodness' (1999: 35). This re-presentation he sees as serving a contemporary need to make the Holocaust 'produce a set of universal lessons' (42). Both



novels refute this strain of optimism. Karmel's in particular represents a savage parody of the *Bildungsroman*. *An Estate of Memory* suggests that desperate survival strategies inevitably intersect with the Nazis' aim to isolate prisoners and set them against one another, while obtaining as much work from them as possible. Yet, crucially, Karmel refutes the central truism of much autobiographical male narrative: the women suffer particularly because they refuse to abandon their gendered behaviours of altruism and relatedness.

A final justification for choosing both these novels resides in the quite different perspectives of these writers. While Karmel's work reproduces aspects of her own experience (Kremer, 1999: 41, 55, 57); Fromberg Schaeffer, on the other hand, initially had "a phobic reaction to the Holocaust era"<sup>2</sup> until she discovered that an acquaintance was a survivor; her novel is 'In quest of what the Holocaust "really meant instead of what it was supposed to mean"<sup>3</sup>. Harold U. Ribalow quotes her as stating that "The word 'holocaust' seemed... oversimplified"; it "subsumed the people, made [them] disappear into the symbol". The novel embodies her "tendency to think about events in terms of people"<sup>4</sup>.

Kremer summarises the distinctive elements of female survivors' testimonies which are replicated in fictions by women:

despite every effort by oppressors to dehumanize them and set them against one another, women, suffering gnawing hunger, share food; women, weary from the day's excruciating labor, pick one another's lice and sustain one another through long, painful roll calls; ailing women nurse one another through typhus and other contagious diseases; they share memories, recipes, remembered literary passages, and religious observances to bolster morale and determination in the battle for survival against overwhelming odds. Daughters adopt maternal roles in support of weakened mothers, and women, anguished by the loss of their biological families, create substitute camp families. The novelists echo survivor memoirs in attesting to the social nature of female bonding and in celebrating these unions as essential to women's survival (1999: 19-20).

Despite their radically different perspectives, both novels incorporate almost all these elements.

#### 4.2 *An Estate of Memory*: literary and cultural context

Ezrahi (1982: 215) claims that the 'literary model' for *Anya* was Ilona Karmel's 1969 work *An Estate of Memory*. Karmel challenges assertions that incarceration can be countered by inner strength; rather, self-dramatising and inner resistance become saving fantasies which compensate for the individual's essential powerlessness. Incarceration in *Anya* figures as a provisional experience, from which she can reconstruct a postwar identity. In Karmel's novel the Lager forms its hermetic locus in which, by its close, Barbara Grünbaum's and Tola Ohrenstein's identities have become irrevocably damaged. The price paid for individual survival, the novel hints, is eventual collusion. Karmel probes deep into the experience *Anya* escapes:

the annihilation of feminine identity under the continued onslaught of terror. Carol Gilligan states that 'the opposition between selfishness and responsibility complicates for women the issue of choice, leaving them suspended between an ideal of selflessness and the truth of their own agency and needs' (1998: 138). This novel fully articulates this conflict.

It 'inverts the conventional war narrative wherein heroic men protect endangered women' (Horowitz in Baskin (ed.), 1994: 276). Sara Horowitz states that women in many male Holocaust narratives, some 'openly hostile' to them, 'figure peripherally, as helpless victims (although the men were no less helpless), as absent loved ones (although the men, too, were absent), as needing rescue (although the men, too, needed rescue)' (263). Like other critics, she believes that the Holocaust 'ultimately [challenges] – and perhaps [disables] – the confident and unimpeded transmission of [Western] culture's knowledges, ideologies, and values', sharing postmodern concerns with reversals: 'background gains the foreground and margins, the center' (1997: 44). Karmel's novel specifically engages in this process of speaking for the otherwise silenced: women who actually died in the Holocaust.

The novel describes the moral and physical disintegration of the inmates of the Skarsysko-Kamienna labour camp. As hunger, hardship, disease and selections kill the other inmates, the exposure to constant degradation and danger strains the "camp family" of Barbara and Tola to breaking point. The smuggling of Aurelia's newborn baby out of the camp, which some critics have seen as a redemptive motif, is at best ambiguous. One life saved must, Karmel suggests, be balanced against the long lists of those lost.

#### 4.3. The role of gender

The text focuses on women incarcerated within a male hierarchy, persecuted alike by Nazis and the Jewish O. D. men, the camp police. Motherhood above all exposes them to racial misogyny. Ultimately, the breakdown of the family can be seen as a failure of the women to structure their "camp family" in ways other than after the patriarchal model. Memory itself, the novel suggests, is *gendered*.

What are the significant cultural determinants which, in Karmel's view, fix women's gender roles within the Holocaust? What have they learned about men's dealings with women? How do they compensate for impoverished cross-sex relationships? How is their specifically feminine consciousness narrated?

Motherhood, Horowitz suggests, serves two diverse functions within Holocaust narrative. Resistance to atrocity can find 'concrete expression' in the saving of mother and child; conversely, 'birth becomes synonymous with death'; the 'conventional symbol of pregnancy as



hope and regeneration' is reversed (Baskin (ed.) 1994: 269). In *Anya* motherhood unambiguously signified regeneration. In this novel, it serves as a symbol of resistance which is largely futile. The child who embodies hope is saved through the incomplete Nazification of a German soldier. Men are 'weak and passive... increasingly reliant upon women for survival', regressing finally 'to a childlike dependence that threatens everyone's survival' (Horowitz in Baskin (ed.), 1994: 276) yet nowhere in the narrative is there a positive, nurturing mother figure. Echoing nineteenth-century women's fiction, mothers are physically or psychologically absent; when present, they are ineffective, rendered so by their gender acculturation within prewar Jewish society. It is, as Ruth Angress in her Afterword states, 'a book that describes life among women who can expect nothing from men' (Karmel, 1986: 450). Claudia Koonz claims that 'From the prisoners' first minutes in a camp... gender remained as one of the few social markers' (Rittner and Roth (eds.), 1993: 291). Karmel's women are the lowest caste in a man-made and man-administered hierarchy which strongly echoes the hierarchical arrangement of their previous Jewish cultures. The toxic qualities of this gender acculturation are never more clearly revealed than in women's acting out of masculine roles within their "camp family".

This narrative, like Edith Baneth's testimony, is enacted in a mixed camp; the reader thus has an opportunity to compare men's and women's behaviour. Felicja Karay, a Skarsysko-Kamienna survivor, remembers that women were abused sexually by German and Polish officialdom alike; this included rape. They were worked as hard as men; they were punished with equal severity (Ofer and Weitzman (eds.), 1998: 287-91). The women's relationships with male prisoners were fraught with sexual exploitation. 'The Kracower inteligenz women at first rejected the advice of the experienced kaelniks [women transferred from Majdanek camp] that they find kuzyns [literally "cousins", protectors] if they did not wish to meet a quick death... they could not imagine having an affair with some miserable cobbler from the shtetl' until they realised that such a privileged male protector could save them from death (Ofer and Weitzman (eds.), 1998: 296). These liaisons endangered women: 'Although many women stopped menstruating under the afflictions of hard labor and malnutrition, impregnation was frequent. Pregnant women were singled out for death in every selection' (298). This is an important corrective to Ezrahi's claim that within Karmel's narrative women's 'need for companionship' is 'so great that "cousins" or "lovers" are frequently adopted – often sight unseen – across the fence that separates the men's and women's camps' (1982: 80). In the novel, women derive physical as well as emotional nourishment from other women. The male prisoners, and the Jewish police, are at best benignly distant; at worst, they are corrupt.

The women 'beg and peddle their belongings for one another, feed and warm one another, and tend one another in childbirth and illness – sustaining a supportive alliance in the face of horrendous obstacles to their survival' (Kremer, 1999: 36). In her personal testimony, Livia Bitton Jackson recalls how during Auschwitz initiation 'The shaving had a curious effect. A burden was lifted. The burden of individuality. Of associations. Of identity. Of the recent past'

(1994: 79). Karmel's narrative suggests that women cannot so easily escape this burden. Andrea Reiter finds, quoting a Ravensbrück survivor, that women's gender identities hampered their adaptation: 'The reality of the camp was too difficult for them to face, because their "relation to the outside world... had in most cases been mediated by their father, brother or husband. Once separated from that reference figure, they felt abandoned and their distress weakened them a great deal"'<sup>5</sup>. The sex segregation in the concentration camp, by which the Nazis aimed to destroy family ties, failed to do so, Koonz argues. Inmates 'reconstructed lost bonds, for they carried with them *the family as memory and model* on which to build new ties' (Rittner and Roth (eds.), 1993: 292, emphasis added). In Karmel's narrative this imprinting hinders adaptation; the women's failures to uphold patriarchal ideals – shown to be dysfunctional long before the Holocaust – initiates the break-up of the "camp family". '[L]ife... in the camps dissolved the patriarchal assumptions people brought with them' yet 'Memoirs written about that life suggest that often victims... played out stereotypical roles for pragmatic reasons as well as because of unconscious assumptions'. Searching for 'a vocabulary with which to describe the deep ties they formed to their fellows' incarcerated 'adapted the familiar vocabulary that carried reassurances of steadfastness and shared devotion in the middle of a lethal environment' (Koonz in Rittner and Roth (eds.), 1993: 293). When women's "estates" of memory are, like Barbara's, masculine spaces where women are subordinated, this lexis itself can be lethal. 'Karmel's domestic imagery works positively to chart women's nurturing and resistance roles', Kremer claims (1999: 37); its deliberate displacement of 'conventional war imagery routinely employed by male authors' heightens 'the traumatic impact of military aggression on a civilian population' (38). Women also utilise male metaphor to emphasise their alienation within this supremely masculine hierarchy (Reiter, 2000: 102-3). However, certain metaphors occurring within Holocaust narrative may 'border on the inappropriate' (106); the women in Karmel's narrative can never domesticate their environment. Such metaphors might be said rather to foreground the dissonance between women's normal lives and atrocity.

The 'figure of the mute witness' (Horowitz, 1997: 49) has been identified as a dominant trope within Holocaust narrative. In *An Estate of Memory* cross-sex dialogue typically renders women mute. Women plan speeches in imagination which are never voiced; their words emerge as stammering. These faltering dialogues increasingly characterise women's relationships as they re-enact remembered patriarchal family structures. By the time they part, Barbara and Tola are mute witnesses to the failure of women's bonding when it can only organise itself via the language of gender.



#### 4.4 The operation of gender in Karmel's fiction of incarceration

##### 4.4.1 Engendering identities

Primarily, *An Estate of Memory* can be read as the site of contest between the two forms of narrative identified in chapter 2. Barbara Grünbaum embodies the self-dramatising narrator whose identity constellates around heroic spiritual resistance to atrocity. Tola Ohrenstein's adaptation to the concentrationary system constitutes a form of self-effacement which Ezrahi in particular finds suspect. Originally an heiress to 'the wealth and prestige' of her family, it is at first 'beneath her dignity' to accommodate herself to survival. A loner until Barbara's arrival, she learns altruism for the sake of their "camp family". Finally she 'crosses the line of altruism into Darwinian survivalism'; she 'collaborates with the murderers and becomes increasingly estranged from her companions until she disowns them entirely' (1982: 77-8). As Des Pres states, 'The struggle to survive... is felt to be suspect. We speak of "merely" surviving', reserving our 'reverence and highest praise for action which culminates in death' (1976: 5). Ezrahi argues that Tola 'serves the system with such fidelity that it eventually becomes clear that she has simply substituted one power structure for another' (1982: 77). What is that nature of this *first* structure? How has it shaped Tola's identity?

The Ohrenstein family constitute 'a landmark, generation after generation':

First the fathers, stolid unhurried men, walking with arms folded behind their backs, and tilted backward, as if to display – this their only ostentation – the proof of piety, the magnificent full beards. Next the sons, equally unhurried, only as their piety shrank so did their beards – to small triangles, the only sharp feature in their gentle faces. Their women matched this restraint. To them the age of thirty was a boundary beyond which bright colours were forbidden, nothing but a cameo or a string of pearls adorning their dark dresses, as if being an Ohrenstein exempted them from all dictates of fashion, while imposing an obligation stricter by far – that of never venturing outdoors without a hat and gloves (5).

This rigid hierarchy is naturalised – a *landmark*. The authority of the fathers and their increasingly feminised sons is God-given. An unbridgeable divide separates off "their" women, regulated by *earthly* rules: trivial conventions of dress.

Tola studies her two friends Rubinfeldova and Seidmanka as they are having their clothing painted, a Nazi method of discouraging escape:

Puckering her long horsy face Seidmanka submitted to the brush, then turned sharply, because the frail, graying woman to be painted now was Rubinfeldova, her bunkmate, her inseparable friend.

"Don't splash her," Seidmanka warned the painter; then to Rubinfeldova, "Stop fidgeting. Stop it, I say."

Rubinfeldova stood stock-still. (4).

Tola shuns these 'makeshift camp families – women, young girls, whom loneliness unaccustomed and sudden had brought together' (7) even though these two women would welcome her as a daughter; Seidmanka with paternal sarcasm, Rubinfeldova softly placating. Paradoxically, camp life could represent liberation from the rigid familial hierarchy which these



two women enact, which serves no purpose; when the camp undergoes a selection, both women become helpless, the masculine Seidmanka reduced to stammering and hiccoughs.

The possibility for escaping these roles is embodied in Barbara, 'a Jewess hiding as an Aryan in the Polish camp' (17). Her appearance suggests ambiguity: her 'powerfully built' (48) body is 'so tall that she towered high above everyone'; she has a 'throaty' voice, a 'broad peasant face' (16), large hands (48). Formerly 'lady of the manor' of a 'vast estate' (17) where Tola once begged aid, her prewar appearance suggested conflicting identities: the 'ruby brooch... pinned askew to her white linen blouse' was the only signifier of rank in a woman who kept order among the ragged column of refugees 'with the earnestness of a child allowed to play with real pots and pans' (48). Even in Plaszow camp, she is possessed of a wealth of identities. Dispensing extra rations and news of Allied gains – in reality optimistic inventions – she is represented to Tola as 'no common prisoner' but 'a partisan... the special emissary of the underground to the Jews'. Her ignorance of geography causes her also to be regarded with suspicion, as an *agent provocateur* (19).

Guarding Barbara's real identity – Jewish – confers on Tola a masculine sense of protectiveness: 'in her a joy gathered, that now even for this woman so reckless, so unaware of danger, she was standing six'<sup>6</sup>. Her scrutiny has overtones of courtship: 'Twice she went to the place where the Poles worked. Along the slope in pairs, joined by the heavy planks, the women were climbing up the steep slope. The one carrying a plank alone and so lightly as if she were doing it for exercise, for sport, was Barbara. Tola watched, and that she turned back without speaking to Barbara was still another way of protecting her' (20). Tola's own identity until meeting Barbara has masculine characteristics: she speaks sparingly, preserves an ironic detachment, is decisive; when beaten, she refuses to articulate physical pain. In camp, gendered identities are to some extent neutered: men and women alike have their surfaces inscribed by the SS, whether by paint to stop escapes or by the marks of punishment. For Tola, 'some kind of immunity seemed to lie in being different from the others' (25). The phrase "'Together, we must stay together,'" (28) is the repeated refrain of women in the novel. Tola constructs herself in opposition to this, for her, typically female behaviour: 'she was under no obligation to risk her neck for [Seidmanka and Rubinfeldova], hiccuping [*sic*], screaming hysterically' (31-2). She repudiates the Nazis' strategy of imposing collective responsibility – 'whoever had a chance to save himself had also the right' (25) – in a way reminiscent of Carol Gilligan's modelling of masculine morality as a discourse of opposition within 'a contest of rights' (1998: 30). In a manner characteristic of male narratives as diverse as Frankl's and Levi's, Tola has mentally struck out her past: her family 'had not been killed, they had simply never existed; she had always been alone' (40).

There resides a metaphoric truth in this. 'Of happiness there had never been much in those vast, lightless rooms. Later, when everything was named and classed, even the unhappiness



had become clear: the old family business was going downhill; her parents' marriage left much to be desired' (41). Her mother, from a more cultured Warsaw family, had come to Cracow on a 'civilising mission, more as a reformer than a bride' (41). This mission becomes a silent war, fought not even by the couple themselves but by the opposed signifiers of gender and culture which deputise for them: 'crochery kept ousting the decimated china' Mrs Ohrenstein brought with her; her 'frail rococo pieces' shrank from the 'dark and massive' mahogany furniture (41). 'Each evening, taking stock of her defeats, Mother would look at the huge credenzas, at plush chairs and chipped glass, and then, her hand pressing her "nervous" heart, at father who would start and look away at once. Not a word, not a whisper fell, yet a barrier seemed to cut the room into two opposing sides' (41-2).

Tola rejects her mother in defeat: her 'white, obese body brought pity akin to disgust' (42). She aligns herself with the winner, her father: 'on their walks together... the street... turned into a kaleidoscope... when he explained to her "The earth is round," the most ordinary street curved like a fruit beneath her feet' (42). The family's social standing is literally invested in this masculine ability to persuade, even deceive, though the plaque on the wall of the family's manufactory specifically foreshadows ruin in the Holocaust to come:

ROYAL FOUNDRY – the embossed letters said. Beneath them the enamel landscape was *divided*: on one side, torch still smoking, an incendiary leered at his handiwork – a house transformed into raw flesh, its roof tongues of flame, its windows scarlet wounds, and from behind the blistered scab of the door more tongues trying to scoop up the victim fleeing near-naked into the night. But succour was coming from the other side: there a house stood peaceful in the first light; the windows glimmered; not daring to transgress, a fire burned in the stove behind the door, where those hastening to help the victims stopped to look at what had saved them – the tin roof shining silver in the sun (43, emphasis added).

Tola's father's 'task' is to 'sheathe houses in such inviolable protection. Father was not just a merchant, but a man with a mission, compared to which Mother's civilizing venture shrank to very little indeed' (43). In plain language, he is a *salesman*. The family landscape is divided, at war with itself, long before these clear premonitory signifiers develop their full power. Yet as racial persecution intensifies, he cannot protect their household from the conflagration. He 'appeared in a new shape – a shy, ineffectual man, who kept much to himself and brightened only among his friends, pious and unsuccessful as he was' (46). The gendered power balance within the family is reversed in ways researchers have found typical: women found 'courage and a sense of mission. It was now their responsibility to take care of the family. Thus the line between men's and women's roles became somewhat blurred' (Ofer in Ofer and Weitzman (eds.), 1998: 147-8). Tola now sees her father 'from the barrier's other side'; he represents 'the revelation that never came' (46). Tola's mother and grandmother take the initiative in seeking help from Barbara at her manor house, trading on the family name until it is worthless. When the male name will no longer signify, the family's identity becomes matriarchal, more typically Eastern European, where gender roles were less 'rigidly divided' (Hyam, Ofer and Weitzman, 1998: 31) and where 'the dominant cultural ideal was the strong, capable working woman' (32).

Now, 'while the women had their hands full trading, keeping the house, the men, the proverbial Jewish family men, politicked and played cards, like those once despised ne'er-do-wells' (Karmel, 1986: 54).

Sander Gilman claims that a means by which Jews counter self-hatred is by fantasies of alignment with the powerful group who define them as Other (1992: 2). Tola and Barbara, like Anya, both use their Jewish identity to escape sexual threat. Yet faced with the 'loathing' of German soldiers on learning her Jewish identity, 'as if one reaching for a flower had touched a slimy bug instead', Tola attempts to recreate the sexism of a successful patriarchal family as a means to close the *racial* gap, 'to dazzle them with a show of amity that would transform Father into a patriarch upon whom his family waited with devotion nothing could diminish' (55). Tola, like Anya, is caught in the cross-fire of racial and sexual stereotypes. Just as a student mutilated in a pogrom becomes Anya's leitmotif, the shooting of a girl who was 'too beautiful to be a Jewess' (56) haunts Tola. Mrs Ohrenstein, disguising her racial identity, becomes metonymic of wartime motherhood, 'just one of the countless women who, left alone to shift for their children, give their all to this aim' (60). The mother/daughter role becomes interchangeable: 'It was as if they had enough strength between them for only one. When Mother led, she just followed like a frightened child. If Mother faltered, she took over'. Tola's father, in hiding because of his Jewish appearance, is 'left with strangers like the less-loved child' (61).

#### 4.4.2 Karmel's hermetic world

'On that day everyone in the camp was painted' (Karmel, 1986: 3). With this cryptic opening sentence, Karmel's third person omniscient narrator acts not to give the reader an overview but rather to suggest the impossibility of such a viewpoint within Holocaust narrative. In each crucial scene this panoptic viewpoint is abandoned; the reader is instead trapped in the free indirect thought of the central characters. The reader here is an uncomprehending new inmate dropped unceremoniously into the middle of the Plaszow *Appellplatz*. As Levi suggests, "'not trying to understand"...was the first wise dictum one had to learn in the Lager... Logic and morality made it impossible to accept an illogical and immoral reality: from this came a rejection of reality which as a rule rapidly led... to despair' (1989: 115). Within the Lager 'Survival without renunciation of any part of one's own moral world – apart from powerful and direct interventions by fortune – was conceded only to very few superior individuals, made of the stuff of martyrs and saints' (1987: 98). Barbara's refusal to comprehend concentrationary reality on its own terms – she is constantly retreating into memory – is seen not as resistance but simply nostalgia. Like Barbara, Rubinfeldova views the Holocaust comparatively, attempting with her repeated phrase "when



the world was still a world” to ‘reduce [the camp] to a nightmare, a transient freak’ (1986: 9). ‘To say, as others did, “The O.D. men beat us to save their skin,” “The Lagerkommandant shoots to stay away from the front”– to grant this nightmare any logic would have meant admitting it into the world, which, Rubinfeldova insisted, “one day will be a world again.” (9). For Tola, conversely, memory constitutes ‘that attic... where all the clutter of stuff that is no longer useful for everyday life is deposited’ (Levi, 1989: 115). Memory in this narrative is at least ambiguous, a refusal to accommodate one’s identity to atrocity *and* a form of escapism.

The novel reduplicates the totality of the Holocaust. When Tola and her companions march to their work outside the camp, they are mocked and derided: “Jews, all painted!”. The prisoners’ clothes have been daubed with red paint to prevent escape, but paint/painting swiftly becomes a doubled metaphor: women also paint *themselves*, desperately rouging to render their appearance acceptably feminine before selections despite the fact that this emphasises their dreadful appearance. In her imagination Tola rehearses a reply to a Pole whose own clothing renders him a ludicrous Nazi caricature. ‘Sir, you should order another outfit, you know, fashions may change soon, Tola would say this to him, she must. Yet she could not; she was afraid her voice would come out a screech’ (12). Just as the women cannot give up the signifiers of femininity – despite making targets of themselves – Tola cannot bring herself to sound unfeminine. The misogyny which constitutes the daily enactment of atrocity is characterised by such dialogic failures. A soldier guarding the work-party finds that Tola speaks ‘meticulous Hochdeutsch’ (13); ‘Torn between his deference to a city girl... and his awareness that such deference was no longer called for, he stuttered, then yelled, then left for good’ (13). Returning to the camp, Tola sees German soldiers with their Polish girlfriends, ‘numb wartime lovers with no speech but touch’ (15). The camp appears – temporarily – a safer environment; Tola abandons her planned escape. As if a point has been proved, the narrative now seals off the camp completely; all outdoor work is stopped.

#### 4.4.3 Women's relationships with women

How might we interpret the intense relationship between Tola and Barbara as depicted here? Investigating women's same-sex relationships in the Holocaust ‘typically requires an investigation into an entity whose very existence is often denied because homosexuals are generally envisaged as men’; lesbians ‘were socially ostracised into silence’ (Elman in Fuchs (ed.), 1999: 9). As Vera Laska finds, ‘if there is hardly any documentation on male homosexuals in the camps, there is even less available on Lesbians’ (Rittner and Roth (eds.), 1993: 263). Yet deep friendships existed between women which ‘may have become lesbian relationships. These have been difficult to document given the inhibitions of survivors and historians’ (Milton in



Rittner and Roth, 231). Fania Fénelon describes how 'In Birkenau, one couldn't long remain ignorant of homosexuality – it was rife; it offered the women satisfaction for their fantasies, allayed their solitude, their sexual needs' (1977: 145). If we simply assert that women's relationships are asexual, we risk occupying the Nazis' own ideological position which 'assumed a comprehensive "natural" dependence of women upon men – especially in sexual relations' so that 'Any self-determining female sexuality, including lesbian forms, was unthinkable within a centuries-old patriarchal tradition that identified passivity as a female sexual characteristic' (Schoppmann in Grau (ed.), 1995: 9). Ella Lingens-Reiner, a doctor and Holocaust survivor, suggests a more flexible approach. Accused of condoning the many lesbian liaisons within her barrack, she states that

Those people... imprisoned healthy young women for years in surroundings where there was nothing for them to love... Then they let the prisoners lie two and three at a time in the same bunk, for months on end, and when the women then clutched at each other, trying to find joy, the S.S. doctor reproached the prisoner-doctor with "not doing anything about it". In their eyes, sexual problems did not exist for women, while they somehow acknowledged their existence in the case of the male prisoners, if only by setting up brothels for them (1948: 106).

The Nazis' outrage is all the more strange to her because 'there were among the prisoners some with decided traits of pathological sexuality – women who wore men's clothes in the evenings whenever they had an opportunity, and called themselves "Otto" and "Fritz" (106). If within a relatively tolerant early narrative, where sexuality was often more frankly described (see chapter 2, p. 44), overt lesbians are so negatively stereotyped, it is little wonder that in fiction they may be obscured. We are forced, as Amy Elman suggests, to "read between the lines." This does not mean that one discovers lesbians where none exists. Rather, marriage and other public postures notwithstanding, one is especially careful to avoid presumptions of heterosexuality' (Fuchs (ed.) 1999: 10). Laska, like Lingens-Reiner, believes that some women's 'warm relationships' might develop a sexual dimension:

Endless months or years living without psychological or physical love, in the constant shadow of death... compelled many women to the only sexual outlet available to them, that is, an erotic tie with a person of their own sex. As in many prisons, in concentration camps women who would otherwise regard Lesbianism with abhorrence would gradually slide into the acceptance of such liaisons (Rittner and Roth (eds.), 1993: 263).

Karmel's novel, published in America in 1969 – the year of the American Stonewall riots which marked only the beginning of public debate on homosexuality – is, it could be argued, more likely than otherwise to leave the reader to fill in the textual spaces suggestive of eroticism between Tola and Barbara in particular. Clearly such spaces exist. Categorising Barbara's and Tola's relationship in Freud's terms is arguably to reduplicate negative male stereotyping<sup>7</sup>; yet it would surely be equally unsafe to discount the possibility of their relationship's having a sexual dimension, as it would be to deny literary cross-referencing to fictions such as, for example, the lesbian writer Radclyffe Hall's. Karmel's narrative, which represents Tola's and Barbara's relationship in a manner strongly reminiscent of Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*, suggests an



awareness of the cultural hypocrisy regarding women's same-sex relationships within Holocaust narrative – carrying distinct overtones of Nazi ideology – whereby a woman's lesbian affair is not counted against her as long as it is viewed as a transient aberration, a by-product of atrocity itself. Conversely, self-identifying lesbians are vilified, often carrying overtones of the female SS guard, 'brutal, stocky, obese women in knee-high leather boots' (Milton in Rittner and Roth (eds.), 1993: 225).

Fénelon's autobiographical work *The Musicians of Auschwitz* clearly articulates this split. Playing in the orchestra at a party for German "asocial" prisoners, Fénelon identifies among the women 'clearly differentiated' gender roles: 'the "boys" were in silk pyjamas – presents from their girl friends – and the "ladies," in their turn, wore ravishing transparent blouses, misty muslins, black lace negligees bordered with feathery clouds of pastel swansdown' (1977: 218). The women's 'couplings' are represented as a 'frantic, almost pitiful search for pleasure; their kisses are 'octopuslike... wet, sucking, gurgling' (220). Their relationships are safely contained within heterosexuality: they are prostitutes who will resume heterosexual identities the following day<sup>8</sup>. When lesbians in a *ménage à trois* quarrel, Fénelon engages in a repugnant oral penetration, stuffing sugar into one hysterical woman's mouth to calm her: 'what joy to thrust this Polish treasure into that dribbling aperture' (146). In this passage, stereotypes of female undesirability – ugliness, obesity, greed – are conflated with lesbian stereotypes – women aping men. Fénelon's antipathy towards these women can be contrasted with her tacit acceptance of the transient relationship between women self-identified as heterosexual – Little Irene has had a male lover and later marries. This is construed as a 'pure, clean feeling' (147), its sexual nature effaced despite Marta's passionate declaration of physical desire (144). The 'doings' of the other 'sordid, hysterical group' (146) have nothing in common with this love, construed as a disturbance of "normal" nature occasioned by incarceration.

Within Holocaust narrative, then, hetero/homosexual distinctions can become destabilised. It is in the light of this – and bearing in mind also the risks inherent in an overt narrative of lesbianism in the Holocaust – that women's relationships in Karmel's novel should be read.

#### 4.4.4 The dynamics of relationship

When Barbara Grünbaum's husband Stefan is called up to war, even their customary minimal, superficial conversation is silenced 'As if a language they had not yet learned was required' (78). Within this novel, silencing might be said to be the praxis of patriarchal hierarchies, of which the family acts as primary signifier. Stefan's life, 'a waste, a complete failure' (280), resembles Tola's father's. Barbara's marriage is a 'an elopement with suffering, a mission only she could fulfil' (281). Stefan's sterility symbolises the marriage, barren of linguistic

connection; it acts to further silence Barbara: 'all right to anger was denied her from now on'. It confers on him, paradoxically, 'a new power over her – because from now on her every outburst would be read as payment for what had happened' (283). Her own identity, not Stefan's, is transformed by his inability to father children. Her neighbours 'whispered behind her back; they said it was to the women who looked like Mother Earth that such things often happened'. Her childlessness is blameworthy: "Yes, it's my fault," she would tell them, "only mine!" (284). Barbara's only scope for heroism resides in this voluntary silencing. Barbara, as did Tola, tries to bolster fragile patriarchy, '[sheltering Stefan] from the usual [family] jibes about his working harder than a farm hand', feeling 'vexation' that he will not defend himself (76). Weak character that he is – a failure at medical school, a wealthy drifter – his power to command silence seems to reside solely in his gender.

"Could you be quiet?" Stefan said. "The peasants are here, I must talk to them. No, please, stay here, all of you," he added as some of the guests tried to follow him. [Barbara] was no guest; she went with him...

"We have been called up, sir," the oldest one said. Then one by one they spoke, some wanting a piece of advice, some a loan, and all asking Stefan to keep an eye on their belongings, on the cattle and the women too. Barbara, not spoken to, stood on the side like a guest after all, unwanted in this world of men's affairs (77).

This reification of women is reminiscent of the Nazis' declaration that 'there was a surplus of women in the [Plaszow] camp' (73); their decision to ship the Polish women into Germany prompts Barbara to resume her Jewish identity. "Nothing can be worse than what awaits me in Germany". (73). The Nazis, like the Poles, regard women as commodities. Stefan, off to war, commits Barbara – silenced yet again – to the care of his steward:

"Well, take care of her, Antoni," Stefan said. "You know what she's like."

"Like a child," said Antoni, "if I may make so bold. Just like a foolish child." (78).

Barbara, initially 'helpless' without Stefan, nevertheless finds in war 'a richness and a breadth' (80). Caring for an extended "family" of refugees, she takes on a masculine identity: after 'pacing up and down until midnight' Barbara asks to accompany the retreating Polish soldiers to help in the defence of Warsaw. She is refused; but when a young officer asks her for a cap and she gives him her old school beret, he salutes her (82). Barbara, like Tola and her mother, has learned to occupy both gender roles, becoming someone 'to whom hundreds had come for help... whom... neither bombs had frightened nor the Krauts' (84). The German soldiers who occupy her manor do not frighten but enrage her. Yet, as in dialogue with Stefan, words fail her:

"When you leave, put the keys here," she said in her dictionary German, "so that we'll find them when we return."

"Wie, bitte?" The Germans looked at her. "Wie?" They shook their heads, as she, stuttering with anger, kept repeating the carefully memorized phrase, for the sake of which she had stayed (83).

Tola's and Barbara's first meeting after Barbara joins the Jewish prisoners is marked with this halting and stammering:



The group coming out of the last barracks, those were the Poles, the tall figure in front Barbara, stepping aside, inching her way closer and closer to the Jewish column; and now she ducked, vanished in the crush, reappeared, looking changed, wearing a painted coat. "Barbara, here!" Tola tried to cry and could not. She stood, her arm outstretched. A throaty whisper, a hand touched her shoulder. "You... you here?" Tola stammered.

"Sure, I said I would come." (87).

Yet the fluidity and probing of their first prolonged dialogic exchange signifies a freedom from cross-gender constraint:

"Barbara, you had to come here, right? You had to." Getting no answer, she insisted.

"I had to? What do you mean?"

"Someone was after you, about to denounce you."

"Oh, no, no-one was after me."

"No one?"

"Not a living soul."

Tola got up, groping in the dark, bent down over Barbara trying in vain to see her face. "No one?" She repeated. "But then – why have you come here, what have you done to yourself?"

"Oh, that was no life there, no life at all."

"And here?"

"Here I can be myself again, I can do something, can help."

"Is that why you came?"

"Yes, that's why! But you, you sound as if you don't believe me."

For a long time Tola was silent until "No!" she cried. "I don't believe you, I can't. You couldn't have just come to play the savior; someone must have been after you, someone..."

"You want to cross-examine me, like the Gestapo?" hoarsely Barbara broke in. "No one was after me; when I say something, I mean it. Now remember this, once and for all." (88-9).

With Tola Barbara feels "as if a gag had been taken out of my mouth"; she wants 'to talk, to lay her heart open'. Memory is a 'banquet hall' filled with guests and laid with 'the feast of the heart' which she desires Tola to share, yet Barbara is 'a bungler when it came to talking', she would 'stutter and grope'. This conflict partially stems from her disguised racial identity. 'Upon everything once Barbara's an interdiction had been passed; she shammed and lied, while within her, like breath held too long, the truth welled up' (90). Identifying herself with an antisemitic stereotype of linguistic dishonesty which, Gilman argues, was applied with particular virulence prior to the Holocaust (1992: 310), she sees her silence as 'a symptom of an ugly craftiness which she knew was ascribed to Jews' (Karmel, 1986: 90-1). Tola is the catalyst by which she recovers her identity, through speech: "'Then you came," [Barbara] spoke softly, "and suddenly I could remember, could feel myself once again"' (91).

#### 4.4.5 Testing the fictions of heroism

In hiding on her own estate, Barbara despises herself for 'sitting with folded hands' (97). She leaves, is unable to find a resistance cell, and is herself arrested and beaten. Marlene

Heinemann suggests that a characteristic 'self-dramatizing portrayal' of incarceration 'minimizes... vulnerability and idealizes... resistance to physical brutality' (1986: 45). Barbara tells Tola: 'I didn't mind getting thrashed, and that they could do more to me, this I never believed' (98). In reality women possess no power to delimit what the Nazis can do. What they *are* is inscribed by men such as Goldberg, the Jewish policeman:

"Tell me," the man gripped [Tola's] arm, "are they all like you?"

"In what way?" Tola asked.

"Skinny. Flat-chested and skinny. A woman is worth as much as she weighs... Ouch," He winced as she hit at his hand still clutching her arm. "Ouch, when they get skinny they get proud."

"It's the other way around. Nowadays when they're proud they get skinny." (106-7).

Tola, who has witnessed women trading sex for food, knows that her worth is inscribed upon her body. Barbara's fantasies of her heroic identity actually endanger her when, as we realise, she believes them and tries to enact them in Skarsysko-Kamienna. As Jean Améry states, 'To reach out beyond concrete reality with words' constitutes 'a game that was not only worthless and an impermissible luxury but also mocking and evil'; the 'insufferableness' of incarceration 'could be coped with only through means inherent in that world' (1980: 19).

When Tola and Barbara enter Skarsysko-Kamienna, it appears an improvement on Plaszow. Yet its Werk C was the 'most infamous site in the entire Radom district'; in 'the notorious "death department"' women handled picric acid which 'turned the workers into green-haired monsters with black hands'. In another, TNT coloured the skin reddish-pink (Karay in Ofer and Weitzman (eds.), 1998: 288). In Werk C, Aurelia Katz informs the couple, every bodily surface turns yellow. 'And she pointed at her chest, as if in the bad place even the heart turned yellow. It was the lungs she meant' (Karmel, 108). This concrete meaning becomes metaphoric of the terrified women who beg, bribe and contrive to avoid the Picrine work, where those prisoners are sent whose appearance is most debilitated. Aurelia puts at risk the thirteen year-old Alinka, claiming they are mother and daughter and insisting they stay together; Barbara, selected for the best work detail, claims she and Tola are sisters in an attempt to share the hardship with her. For Barbara, incarceration is figured purely as provisional: "'Yellow, red, green – no matter what color we turn, we'll just scrub it off when the war is over'". Barbara fantasises 'hectically, faster and faster, about before, about after the war, both identical, for her the future being the past transplanted' (120). Yet Tola, listening with 'the adult's envy of such faith in a world of wonders' is also disillusioned: 'even those wonders were secondhand, each borrowed from some other tale' (113). Her fantasies are 'an incantation' (114), an invocation of her sheltered prewar identity. Barbara's ability to control and constrain others through language demonstrates power (Fairclough, 1992: 46), the remnant of her former social status. Her instructions to her former steward Antoni to 'sell her possessions, all of them, at once' so that 'she would have enough to help the neediest in her barracks' (122) demonstrates how swiftly Barbara's naïve belief in the continuance of this power is exploited. Goldberg agrees to transmit her instructions at an exorbitant price. She attempts to educate the prisoners, as if they were her peasants, away



from purchasing 'delicacies obscene in this place, white bread, butter and eggs' from privileged workers whom Barbara regards as "leeches,"... whom she loathed more and more'. For her, this 'evil' peddling tempts everyone: 'the rich to spend their wealth on themselves rather than to share it as they should, the poor to barter away their very last' (121). Barbara's wealth was gained via the exploitative social hierarchy of peasant and landlord; her morality thus appears insensitive if not insincere. Women's only power, as Tola realises, resides in their sexuality. At rollcall, 'every day wenches with thick calves and brazen faces would push to the fore, twisting their fannies, thrusting their breasts out, as if right here, in the black mud of the Appellplatz, they would have given themselves to the O.D. men in payment for not going to the yellow work' (120). Barbara and Tola avoid the Picrine detail 'innocently, just by chance, just because on that day they had walked in the front of the column' (122).

Barbara's evasion of the other prisoners is represented almost as a masculine fantasy. As might a husband at the end of a trying day 'she fled from this greed, this filth, into what was pure and dear to her – into the cold, glossy dark... And with Tola at her side she would walk on and on, until it was safe to go back' (121). Much of Barbara's organisation of her environment is imaginary.

"A 'cousin' is the fellow who takes care of you," the Kaelenka sitting next to Barbara explained. Without a "cousin" you hardly had a chance here; hasagowka wore you out, then hunger did the rest.

"Hasagowka?"

This was a vicious dysentery rampant in the camp. "Typhusiads," the Kaelenka went on, were the convalescents from typhus, and the yellow, paper-swathed figures were to her simply "picriniads." Hasagowka – typhusiad – picriniad. Barbara found a peculiar comfort in those words, as if whatever could be named as easily as an everyday thing could also be mastered and coped with (123-4).

This naming, which is essentially a process of reifying the horrifyingly skeletal "old" prisoners who formerly haunted Barbara, enables her to master her guilt. In *imagination* she hands them 'her ruby brooch, her sapphire bracelet, and the pearls she used to wind thrice round her neck. For it was from the sale of her jewels that Antoni's help was to come' (125). A self-serving dimension constantly contaminates Barbara's apparent charity. On prewar visits to cities she would 'hurry... hatless, with no gloves on' to 'the workers' quarters, the slums', where the tenements were 'huge, yet not enough to contain all the life which spilled over with brawls and infants' cries' (127). She does not, however, go to relieve poverty but to consume its vitality: the numerous references to children, to lovers embracing, points to a voyeuristic devouring of the life which she can neither participate in nor give birth to.

#### 4.4.6 The “camp family” as patriarchy

The organisation of their “camp family”, then, replicates the patriarchal model into which both women were accultured before the Holocaust. Each day Barbara ‘admired Tola more, for her cleverness, her pluck’ (121-2). Through Tola’s feminine cleverness in manipulating her environment, Barbara retains her moral self-image. When Barbara, seduced into pity by Aurelia Katz’s narrative of mass killings at Radom, invites her and Alinka to share her and Tola’s bunk; it is Tola upon whom falls the burden of providing food for Aurelia, particularly endangered through her pregnancy. Aurelia quickly appraises Barbara, using atrocity as a moral lever. ‘What voice was suited to such events Barbara did not know, yet certainly not this mechanical drone, “The atrocities – the bestial Nazi criminals –” Mrs. Katz seemed to be reading a paper, in used-up phrases reporting something too distant to be grasped’ (131). Aurelia is ‘a professional victim’ who ‘Like all such victims... knew how to exploit her helplessness to the hilt. Barbara simply doted on her’ (138).

Karmel provides a dual perspective on the “camp family”. It sustains the women; yet insofar as it replicates the prewar patriarchal family it constrains, even endangers them. Barbara and Tola’s strong and articulate bond has many overtones of marriage:

“So,” Barbara rubbed her hands, “so,” and moistened her lips. “Tolenka, you remember Aurelia and Alinka, don’t you? They’re at Schmitz now; they were transferred from loading shells, dreadful work, just dreadful. And now – now they’ll be staying with us.”

“I see.”

They had no place of their own so I asked them to our bunk.”

“I see.” Then the rustle of paper under Aurelia’s scampering fingers. The paper swished, ripped asunder as Barbara gripped Tola’s arm. “You two stay here,” she ordered the newcomers, pulling Tola down. “We must talk, you stay!” (133).

Outside the barracks Tola stands ‘flattened against the wall, Barbara pacing to work off her anger, because this time she must not flare up’. As Barbara tries to coax Tola, her ‘gentleness pleased her, like a newly acquired skill. “You feel I should’ve asked your permission, your advice at least?”’ (133). Tola retreats into a subordinate role, much like Barbara’s within her marriage: “‘Let’s not quarrel, not this way. You can ask them to stay with us, you can do anything, only let’s not talk like this, never again. I give in. I – someone – a man who knew my family – has offered me some money. I’ll do something with it, cook soup for sale, and somehow we’ll manage.”’ (135-6). Secrecy now contaminates their relationship. Barbara accepts too readily Tola’s story, as if she has not seen the nature of women’s transactions with men. Tola sells her gold tooth, something Barbara previously forbade her to do, as she forbade her to peddle.

Aurelia, ten years married and an expert manipulator, outmanoeuvres Tola in Barbara’s affections.



A sigh – for Aurelia was a past master at sighing – and Barbara came rushing with comfort... In the evening it was "my dear" all the time. "More salt, my dear?" "Isn't the soup wonderful, my dear?"

Tola provided the soup – her profit from peddling' (138).

Tola regards Aurelia 'with a cold, ever-mounting fury' (138), retreating into a masculine distance reminiscent of her father: 'Yes, she was their guardian, so stern that this help would be much more welcome if given in absentia. So she acted like just such a guardian: she hardly ever spoke; when spoken to, she answered in monosyllables' (138-9). Karmel specifically expresses the dynamics of Barbara's and Aurelia's relationship in gendered metaphors. When it sours, Aurelia 'tried to woo' Barbara back: 'It was a terrible, a desperate courtship: everything – past cultivation, present miseries, and the terrors of the grave – thrown into it, and "So fascinating... so inconsiderate... just terrible," Aurelia simpered, her nails digging into her palm, as if to scratch something, anything, to say out of it' (141). Just as the failure of the relationship is signalled by this linguistic failure – Barbara remains silent – Barbara's and Tola's reconciliation is signified by more fluid communication.

#### 4.4.7 Different horrors: childbirth

Writing about childbirth in the Holocaust, Horowitz argues, tends to polarity, emphasising either resistance or atrocity, an approach which 'leads to partial interpretations of women's behavior' (Baskin (ed.), 1994: 270). In Karmel's narrative, childbirth signifies both resistance *and* atrocity, regeneration *and* death. Aurelia's baby lives; Aurelia dies. The birth exposes fully the self-delusive and at times parasitic nature of Barbara's heroic fantasies of protecting Aurelia and saving the child. Suggesting 'how much cowardice and frantic self-defense went into comfort, into the giving and the receiving alike' (184), the novel shows prolonged atrocity undermining the narrative of resistance. Faced with the reality of the living child who must, at the last extreme, be killed, Barbara now physically interposes Tola between herself and this horror: "'You," [Barbara's] own voice seemed to come from far away, "you do it. It's easier for you.'" (258). Barbara evades even the responsibility for delegating this killing which she proclaimed herself ready to perform for Aurelia's sake. 'Not she herself had said "It's easier for you" – Tola must understand – but someone else who had replaced her so completely that the suspension of her whole being, once hoped for, now seemed to have happened, and if wrongly, the fault was not hers' (260). Wolfgang Sofsky believes that the Nazis desired 'not... to limit freedom, but to destroy it' in a moral as well as a physical sense. Generating 'a universe of total uncertainty, one in which submissiveness is no shield against even worse outcomes' (1997: 17), they aimed not only to 'kill the moral person' but to '[eradicate] human personality per se' (88). In a system where women are reified as disposable mass, all represent one body endangered

by Aurelia's pregnancy. The successful smuggling of the child from the camp marks the beginning of social disintegration as well as the failure of Tola's and Barbara's "camp family".

Barbara's own schemes to smuggle the child out are exposed as self-enhancing fictions which take no account of the Nazis' strategy of imposing collective responsibility. Alinka tells her: "You'll keep making your empty noises... till everyone up to the last guard will know about – your plan. Questions will start. Who else tries to help you, who knew about it? You will wriggle out... no-one will protect us, most certainly not you.... I wouldn't risk a hair of Aurelia's head for... your latest charity" (147-8). Barbara treats people 'like books out of a lending library: when their story gets boring, you want to return them and move on to the next story'" (148). Aurelia herself exposes the falsity of Barbara's caring posture: "'Hoopla!" She clapped her hands. "Be happy, Aurelia Katz, be full of hope! Hoopla!" and a clap again, "be miserable, be full of despair. No, I cannot switch so fast, Mrs. Grünbaum, I am not like you"' (215).

Even before the Holocaust motherhood was deformed; mothers were absent or, like Tola's, emotionally defeated. 'Barbara would never have any children; Alinka had grown up motherless; Tola had no-one left' (308). Barbara also appears to have grown up motherless. Aurelia's motherhood is the outcome of an impulse to comfort her husband the night before both were to be shot at Radom. Their marriage is characterised by inarticulateness, emotional isolation and Jewish self-hatred, often projected onto the other. It exemplifies the failures of heterosexual relations in this novel.

Tola's memories of ghetto sex suggest its ambiguous nature, both comfort and coercion:

Most conducive to romances, those rooms, dark, the bodies lying close together. One night a clammy touch had wakened her; she resisted, she bit into the clammy hand. Aurelia had not bothered to resist. She had felt tired, and anyhow, such things did not matter much. Most likely her suitor had at first shrunk back from the withered flesh, then, anything better than nothing, he had rolled closer; most likely, too, someone had looked on with a smirk. And by morning what had happened meant no more to those two than a not too tasty meal. Not that Tola felt shocked. But if life could begin this way, then the crate was the perfect end (151).

That Aurelia's impregnation occurs within respectable marriage seems scarcely to signify when we learn that as she services her husband she 'became unfaithful', fantasising making love with a neighbour (159). Aurelia, consuming her soup alone in the camp's filthy latrine, parodies stereotypical celebratory narratives of maternity. The paper with which she covers the fouled seat, the bag of rags with which she binds her stomach suggest to Tola 'those provisions with which a young mother equips herself for the day in the park. Only a book was missing, only the knitting and a book' (151). Barbara's reaction to the pregnancy, 'looking only at the square torso, the house in which the child lived' (167) effaces Aurelia, to whom the child is 'just a disease, a boil throbbing with pus. In due time this boil would burst open – an operation she might or might not survive' (152). Only for Barbara does the pregnancy provide the possibility of heroism and resistance, a perspective which finds few echoes in women's testimonies.



Her reconciliation with Aurelia is marked by the signifiers of masculine discourse where, as Deborah Tannen suggests, men do not 'concentrate on the troubles of one, pursuing, exploring, elaborating. Instead, each one talks about his own troubles and dismisses the other's as insignificant' (1992: 55).

"Aurelia, don't act so strange. I know, last night I said some abominable things to you. But then I didn't know. And you – you treated me like a Judas. And am I holding it against you? Not at all."

Aurelia was silent.

"I beg you," Barbara whispered, "I beg you, try to understand. You have reasons to be angry with me, I admit it, I've not behaved rightly toward you. Still, I haven't been myself. Everything here *has been so hard on me* – the bickering, the counting of each crumb, the filth... But remember when you first came to Schmitz, my heart went out to you right away, Aurelia, you, in spite of everything – you've always been dear to me. (168).

And at last Aurelia looked up with a shy smile (168, emphasis added).

From this exchange Alinka drags Aurelia away 'as if she were a child caught playing in the company she had been ordered to avoid' (168). In Barbara's subsequent annexing of Aurelia, her obsessive feeding of her, one can detect a complex of motives: anger against Stefan, 'his childlessness, like an infectious disease passed on to her', and envy of 'that other species that somehow had got hold of riches duly hers' (167). Atrocity temporarily becomes a bizarre backdrop, theatrical as unreal, to the tragicomic *folie à deux* of Tola's vying with Barbara to care for Aurelia. '[Tola] was... trying to be good; goodness seemed to her like a foreign language, which once practised is not half so difficult as it was rumored to be'. 'When Barbara praised her for having changed, her sharp face coloured with pleasure'; 'when no-one had to be shown how good she was becoming, she felt formless and at a loss' (171). The connection to reality is retained only through Aurelia's own awareness of the extreme disjunction between fantasies of conventional motherhood and concentrationary reality:

"Work!" The foreman would yell. The air would turn bitter or throb with coughs. And at once, this moment which [Aurelia] had just constructed with such care was tumbling down; she was falling down and down into an icy dark where something huge like a train, something ablaze with light, was coming down upon her, closer and closer, while she, petrified, stared waiting to be crushed (173).

The traditional signifier of hope – light at the end of the tunnel – is transformed into its dark obverse, the train which within Holocaust narrative signifies the end of hope. Similarly, motherhood's signification is repudiated: 'the hope was still in [Aurelia], the hateful, the ever-present hope that perhaps it [the foetus] was stirring no more' (174). It is only to Tola – whose knowledge of atrocity's power to corrupt character makes her a kind of Eve to Barbara's Adam – that Aurelia can articulate her terror at this disfiguration of her feminine identity: "'Tell me," she spoke in chokes, "tell me, am I a monster, an unnatural moth– person? I don't know, I'm losing my grip on myself"' (174).

Alinka's encounter with the young German soldier is marked with all the narrative's signifiers of dialogic failure between the sexes. In particular he symbolises the way in which male



authority can use its power to repress all knowledge of its own atrocity, in itself and in its victims. Asked why she is a prisoner, Alinka's narration of the Radom shooting is terminated. "'Fräulein has been poisoned by Greuelpropaganda.'" His shout made [Alinka] shrink into a black bundle. "Don't ever dare to repeat such stories; they are not true, they cannot be!" (183-4). Alinka's own fantasies, like Tola's, centre around impressing upon the Germans the Jews' *likeness* to them. Instead, this 'simpleton, this laughingstock' (179) in a 'fatherly bass' silences her: "'Ja, Fräulein is refined and educated but just a girl, just a child'" (184). It is the strategy Stefan employs against Barbara. Alinka, like Tola, is realist enough to abandon her fantasies; she has 'no desire to play the heroine like Barbara' (186), particularly when heroism becomes collusive. Barbara, realising that her attempts to contact Antoni have endangered all four women – Goldhagen now knows that one of them is pregnant – enacts before Tola her disguise of Polish antisemitism until 'it was no longer make-believe; now she felt herself become what she should have been – a peasant woman, a mother of one flesh with her child'. The other three women are reified into racial Other: 'a single face, bloodless under the black kinky hair, the eyes too black, the nose bent into a hook. Such as they had to be afraid; she was different. In her no one would discover a Jewess' (190). Her gaze, Nazi-like, fragments her fellow prisoners; they become 'sagging breasts, bellies like crumpled sacks' (197); their bodies fuse into a 'doughlike mass'; 'grey, flaccid dough. She tried to ward it off. She stiffened, she shrank back, yet the dough hung on; smacking, rubbing against her' (197). Barbara's metaphors replicate the Nazis' paranoid dread of Jews as contaminants; these bodies 'writhing around her' had 'done something to her face and would do it to her body unless she got out at once' (198). When told by Tola that "'you look Jewish'" (193), Barbara cannot reconstruct her fantasy of Aryan identity (193). Nor can she derive comfort from her gender identity, 'the memories of all that had touched [her body], air, sun, and the hands of men praising the pleasure it could give' (198) in this situation where women's sexuality is so degraded. Her heroic self-image is all the more vital. When, in a *Strafappell* which, with her ignorance of German, she believes is aimed solely at herself, Barbara abandons Aurelia and Tola, she afterwards re-presents her terror to Aurelia in larger-than-life terms:

"Some miracle saved me. And only then this fear came over, no, *not an ordinary fear*, but such a dread I thought I would never breathe again."

"How terrible!"

"Yes, it was terrible, it was!"

"No. I meant how terrible that you don't know German."

"That what?"

"That you don't know German, that you got frightened for nothing... Some Poles... were implicated in [theft]... that was all [the commandant] said. And he looked at many like you, strong, still able to work. What a terrible misunderstanding. Now, really, you must calm down." (214-5, emphasis added).

The reduction of her ordeal to almost comic farce briefly illuminates for Barbara the core of the Holocaust. '[I]t was indeed meaningless... it has signified nothing, taught us nothing, brought us no profound truth or clarity' (Bartov, 1996: 107). Barbara admits that 'I came here for



nothing' (216). Sofsky maintains that prisoners with no power to influence their future often engage in 'substitute maneuvers' such as fantasy: 'Although the reality content of these reserves for escape differs, they have an equivalent psychological function, serving to help one elude the oppressive burden of the present and maintain at least the fiction of a future' (1997: 91). Barbara's heroism constitutes not effective spiritual resistance but such an evasion. After the *Strafappell*, forced to acknowledge that she has not the courage to attempt to save the child, in fantasy she becomes instead the child's killer, to save Aurelia: "'I'll do everything for her, you understand? Everything – even what is most terrible'" (239). She would perform this role 'not as the others would, from indifference, from fear – only for Aurelia, to save her from something no mother could bear' (225). Tola tells her: "'terrible to you means tragic, and noble, ever so noble. And why? Because you will do it, you, as a self-sacrifice, for Aurelia's sake. And when this thing happens it will be terrible, not in your sense, but in mine – terribly ugly and meaningless, to everyone, even to Aurelia.'" (240). Barbara's retreat into memories of childhood signify an ever more desperate desire to evade a reality she cannot manage through fantasy. She recalls 'how having fallen off a tree, she had picked herself up laughing; how, lost in the woods, she curled up and slept'. These 'stories of courage so out of the ordinary' represent to Barbara 'a voucher of glory, vague, yet certain to come' (223). Tola continually asks how such grandiose expectations can be realised in a locus when individual death, 'a primary ingredient of the tragic vision' (Langer, 1977: 71) is rendered meaningless.

Meditating a desperate plea for the baby's life to the camp commandant, Tola once again seeks to bridge the semiotic difference between German and Jew. If the appeal is to racial equity, Tola's approach is via her feminine identity; she washes her clothes and "irons" them against the barrack stovepipe, telling Barbara: "'I'm a Cinderella, off to a ball without the help of a good fairy. Tomorrow I must get away from the ashes. Tomorrow he must see in me something like himself'" (237). A louse crawling on her arm reorients her to the 'utmost futility' of her appeal: 'someone like herself must be crushed, not in punishment but because this might be safer, because it could not matter less' (238). Tola, like Barbara, is able to view the prisoners through German eyes; she, however, entertains no fantasies of her own difference: 'identical... faces swarmed in the barracks; out in the streets more swarms were turning black as dusk thickened into night. Whether one such face, one dark lump was added or subtracted – what could it matter to him?' (234).

The child's birth is suggestive of the primacy of genocide over individual birth. Aurelia's labouring body metamorphoses into an image reminiscent of a mass grave: 'Reddish and bruised, the enormous belly pushed against [Tola], like a knoll of clay earth over which wheels had rolled' (252). Mercy and cruelty become reversed. When the last baby was born in camp, the commandant ordered that it should not be fed. The women disobeyed and fed it sugar and water: a cruelty; the child's starvation was prolonged. The image of Tola carrying a bucket of water back to the scene of the birth cannot be referred to any prior narrative of impromptu

labour, however extreme the conditions; it points back only to testimonies in which either the midwife, or an SS officer, drowns the child. As Horowitz argues: 'In the grotesque situation of the death camp, cruelty becomes kindness, and murder, lifegiving' (Baskin (ed.), 1994: 272). The child for Barbara now represents the concretisation of her fantasies in their most mocking form. She has come 'to hate it... she could not bear to look at it' (257). 'That the child would come and vanish was all she had ever understood; but that it would come and stay and grow... of this she had never thought' (263).

#### 4.4.8 Death and the failure of the "family"

Ultimately, heroism is unsustainable. Karmel's narrative shows the operation of what Zygmunt Bauman believes was a central tenet of Nazi policy: 'The victims had to think... that their conduct did matter'; to make their behaviour predictable, and thus controllable, the Nazis 'had to induce them to act in the "rational mode"; to achieve that effect, they had to make the victims believe that there was indeed something to save, and that there were clear rules as to how one should go about saving it' (1996: 130). Thus 'at each stage of the destruction – except the final one – there were individuals and groups eager to save what could be saved, defend what could be defended... and thus – although only obliquely – to co-operate' (134). In this hermetic locus, 'the mere concern with self-survival' was 'close to moral corruption' (146). Ultimately, Karmel suggests, Barbara's continued resistance, fighting to save sick prisoners after Aurelia's death, and Tola's accommodation, becoming an *Anweiserin* after their estrangement, serve the same ends. Alive, women are usable commodities. Dead, they fulfil the Nazis' ultimate purpose. For Bauman, 'Once self-preservation had been chosen as the supreme criterion of action, its price could be gradually yet relentlessly increased – until all other considerations have been devalued, all moral or religious inhibitions broken, all scruples disavowed and disallowed' (143). Barbara's desire to preserve her heroic identity – which constitutes her means of self-preservation – exerts on Tola the same pressure: Tola's sacrifices lose their value 'in the inflation which Barbara's generosity had brought about' (171). Karmel suggests, with Bauman, that within the Lager prisoners invariably victimise each other.

In the extreme conditions which exist in the camp towards the close of the narrative, ideologies of femininity, and in particular of feminine self-sacrifice, are interrogated. The self-abnegation which initially sustains the "camp family" is opposed to the ruthlessness required for individual survival. Karmel foregrounds the particular *gendered* dimension of this tension. At the breakdown of their relationship Tola challenges the traditional demand made of women: "Anything done for someone else is a sacrifice, a noble deed; but try to do the same thing for



yourself and the sacrifice becomes a disgrace. Why? I too am someone; I've no contract for survival, I too am afraid" (342).

A prisoner known simply as the Orphan – like Tola an "old" prisoner from Plaszow – sums up to Aurelia the random nature of atrocity:

"they are going to kill us, Mrs. Katz."

"Why?" Aurelia managed to ask.

In a sweeping gesture the Orphan pointed at the shaved heads, the tatters, and the legs slipping on the mud. "Why not?" She said. "Look! Why not?" (311).

The smuggling of Aurelia's child by the soldier who beats prisoners 'because he's crazed by what he sees' (268), who throws away half-smoked cigarettes for prisoners to scavenge and who risks his life to save the child embodies the chaotic contradictions inherent within the Lager, which cannot be comprehended, only made use of. The man smuggles the child to save his beloved image of Hitler from being tarnished by the charge of infanticide. Now Tola attempts at last to make Barbara negotiate directly with the concentrationary system, teaching her enough German to plead with the soldier. When she tells her "everything that's easy is reserved for me; for you I'll make it hard" (268) the truth behind the irony is apparent. Tola has learned the metalanguage of the camp as well as its everyday lexis: in this atmosphere goodness and evil fail as organising narratives. Yet even as these fail, Barbara attempts to recover her heroism with a self-valorising display of grief for Aurelia's death. Just as 'Eagerly, almost with greed [Barbara] took all the blame on herself' (278) for the estrangement between herself and Tola, she desires to annex for herself all mourning for Aurelia: 'Tola and Alinka, did they grieve? She watched them with shame, yet wistfully, begrudging Alinka even her fingers gnawed down to red stumps, but above all... begging them to keep well and leave all the grieving to her' (321). Barbara's 'ritual of grief' earns her 'coveted praise': "How she grieves," the women whispered. "Oh, she's ruining herself with such grief." (323). Yet her 'reluctant way of eating, the wooden voice, even what was most stylized about Barbara's grief' (329) endangers not only herself – slipping towards the *Schmuckstück* state – but those associated with her: now, 'all shunned [Barbara] for fear she might "drag them down"' (328). The narrative hints that Barbara's grief is less to do with the loss of Aurelia than the loss of a prop in her fantasies of the future. Aurelia has helped her maintain her visions of Allied victories; her dreams of resuming life at her estate centre around having Aurelia as her permanent house-guest. Grief is a means of *avoiding* the implications of Aurelia's death, which threaten Barbara herself: 'if what lay so utterly beyond her grasp had really happened, then surely something would have happened to her too, as to a glass that must crash to the ground when the hand that holds it is wrenched away' (319). The typhus epidemic which fatally weakens Aurelia exposes what is diseased in women's bonding, their unhealthy interdependence. The 'immemorial motherly grudges... came into the open: calling everyone around to witness, [mothers] cried out against those daughters who would lay uncovered, who would not touch the soup, who did nothing right, now just as always!' (288). These flawed bonds predate atrocity, originating in the gender expectations which require of



women like Barbara the martyrdom of marital silence and self-sacrifice. Barbara's grief, like these women's anger, suggests a desperate desire to normalise atrocity by retreat into old gender roles, however destructive these may have been. Now, as if replaying the everyday horrors of a prewar marriage, Barbara and Tola communicate only via the adolescent Alinka.

In a key passage, the daily operation of atrocity is represented as less to do with Nazi racial ideology than the women's exploitation – including their sexual exploitation – by the men who collaborate as the Nazis' intermediaries. Karmel suggests that while genocide remains incomprehensible, such exploitation, ubiquitous, predating atrocity, is readily understood.

How could one best get a new outfit here? By going with an O.D. man to the clothing depot, and into bed... Why had so many been sent to Picrine right after the typhus? Because they could not afford the ransom the O.D. men split with the Polish foreman. And the bread for sale, where did it come from? From the hospital, where like peppercorns dead flies dropped upon tangled bodies, while outside the orderly was sunning himself, – he, the wholesale dealer in their bread, their clothes, and their shoes (328).

Mass deaths from selection and typhus now reduce the women's "camp families" to a similar state of transience as these heterosexual relations: 'love was a child's game, the game at playing house with whichever partner came along; because the friends watched over so anxiously were replacements for those typhus had swept away, each found with the usual camp speed, in the usual camp way, by glimpsing a free place on a bunk, by asking, "Are you, too, alone?"' (328-9).

Karmel shows how narratives of resistance now pervert themselves to become collusive. Barbara's heroic fantasies can no longer take the direction of self-sacrifice for her "family", irreparably split as the relationship between herself and Tola disintegrates. After forbidding Tola to become an *Anweiserin* – using what remains of their bond as a blackmailing counter – Barbara is transformed, in her imagination, into a *better* *Anweiserin* than Tola:

She would show Tola... Like a wriggling pup she would carry Tola back to her old seat, would take over the *Anweiserin's* place. Not that she would treat the women with kid gloves, oh no. "Work!" she too would yell, "work, don't sleep." But after each order, each shout, this she would say: "For whom are you working? For that devil Rost? For me? Or for your own sake so that nothing terrible will be done to you, so that you will get out of here and live in decency one day." And... she would make everyone with a full stomach work for two so that those half starved could rest. "See, this is how I would keep them in order," she would say (351).

Barbara, dimly aware of the collaborative nature of this fantasy, is still able simultaneously to discount its implications for the perpetuation of atrocity: 'To be an *Anweiserin*, even *the right kind* of *Anweiserin*, was wrong; wasn't it terrible enough that they had to make ammunition against their own people? Yet, that this kind of work, done only so that someday they could breathe more freely, could eat their fill, might bring harm to anyone, this Barbara could not readily believe' (352, emphasis added).



Tola fully articulates the dark obverse of heroism – the egotism which Langer identifies in narratives such as Frankl's and Bettelheim's (see chapter 2, p. 27), in which Barbara's fear, like her bravery, is somehow superior to that of others':

"You can't change, Barbara. You never will. 'I am afraid,' you say; no, you proclaim it, just as you once proclaimed, 'I came here of my own free will.' And you did come here, you did! To be the queen of the ball – that's why you came; always taking the lead, always the first – first in self-sacrifice, first in grief, first in courage, first in fear. What happened didn't really matter as long as you could be the first. Now it's the same: others do Rost's dirty work, but you, you would have embarked on a mission. Others become flunkies, you would have been a leader, a leader of the people! You missed this mission. Never mind, you'll still get your glory – by proxy – through me! 'Ah!' everyone will marvel. 'Ah, look what Barbara managed to make out of that peddler, that cold fish!' (367).

This rejoinder is to Barbara's demand that Tola 'whack them, yell, do anything, but tell them, all the time tell them, why they must work, for whom,' (367). At base, Tola suggests, Barbara would tell them this *for herself*. In Barbara's self-deception Langer might identify the persistent need to figure Auschwitz in terms of conventional narratives of heroism in order that 'motive and behavior in Auschwitz do not cancel out the belief in moral action that forms the basis of our civilisation' (1982: 7). Ezrahi finds in Tola 'the perfect victim' of the concentrationary system (1982: 78); one might argue that primarily she is victimised by constructions of atrocity in which one prisoner's superior moral resistance is another's moral *inferiority*. This passage suggests the essentially parasitic nature of heroic narrative, reliant upon the construction of such self/other oppositions. Rather than embodying the autobiographies of exceptional individuals, they point up the misappropriation of atrocity in such constructions. Above all, Karmel exposes the disturbing nature of *gendered* ideologies of self-sacrifice, embodying the inverted form of egotism peculiar to women denied the role of *active* participants in narratives of suffering and heroism, and particularly morbid in this environment.

Karmel presents no ideologies of redemptive survival, sketching the future of an old woman Meyerova, who has survived her entire family and may ultimately survive the Holocaust in 'diligent and aimless preservation' in an atmosphere of 'medicine and mothballs that marks the rooms rented to those who live alone' (385). Aurelia's and Barbara's fantasies of the future become ultimately conflated with typhus-induced hallucinations in which the Holocaust almost never existed. Barbara's manor house has become a place 'of blessed memory' (401), the phrase Karmel uses to commemorate the dead. Tola's bodily survival equates with complete psychic disintegration, totally identified with the Nazis' purpose. Barbara, appointed orderly in the camp's sick-bay to care for Alinka after her typhus, fails in much the same way. At first beating women to keep the barrack clean, in the end Barbara 'could not help herself: she had to beat... something in her welcomed every chance for dealing out blows' (394-5). Reintegration can never be other than the construction of a façade, as we see when the end of the war is rumoured:

And at last the news.

In a planned strategic maneuver Lublin had been abandoned; to shorten the front line the German armies had withdrawn from Baranow, from Lvov. The women nodded, the women turned to look at the Meister, then with hardly a sound they lined up before the barrels of soup.

No one pushed anymore, no one complained about old hags; like tourists who long before a trip practice the foreign idiom and manners, they... practiced the patient, soft-spoken ways recalled from before the war. The trust in masculine guidance had been restored to them too (409).

Here, the employment of German lexis to construct defeat as *strategy* undermines the women's sudden reconstruction. It too appears false. Tola's fantasy of liberation is marred by the knowledge she cannot suppress of the permanent corruption of identity. In her imagination, train imagery becomes the focus of a journey *out* of the Holocaust which swiftly becomes a journey *back*:

The hall was a train; in a mob the passengers had burst in; then, seats and possessions secured, they became civil, each telling the others where she had come from. Soon enough all civility had been cast off, soon each mutter, each stare showed from where they had really come. Nothing was new, everything was a keepsake from the past: those stares envying an extra slice of bread; those nods saying, as once of jewels or furs, that everyone knew how such luxuries were come by (385).

Barbara dies preventing Alinka from being selected for death; Barbara herself has performed the selection of the other sick patients. Tola dies intercepting a bullet aimed at Alinka during a death march; her last act as *Anweiserin* is to supervise the women digging mass graves, beating them indiscriminately. Alinka lives; Aurelia's child, too, survives. In the brief Epilogue Antoni updates lists of names, 'the short list for returning... the long... remaining just names' (442). No celebratory emphasis is conferred on individual survival; all remain simply names. Karmel suggests that no myth of individual heroism can weigh against this gross imbalance.



## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Heinemann (1986: 13) quotes Pawelczynska, A. (*Values and Violence in Auschwitz*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1979, p. 53), a Polish woman survivor and sociologist, who found that former cultural distinctions based on gender were eliminated; "traces of these distinctions were only reflected in extra possibilities for tormenting and humiliating prisoners".

<sup>2</sup> Kremer (1999: 120) quotes from Fromberg Schaeffer's Edward Lewis Wallant Award acceptance speech, 27 April 1975.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 120. Kremer quotes from a personal interview with Susan Fromberg Schaeffer, 18 May 1988.

<sup>4</sup> Ribalow, interview with Susan Fromberg Schaeffer in *The Tie That Binds: Conversations with Jewish Writers* (A. S. Barnes & Company, Inc., San Diego and New York, 1980, p. 84).

<sup>5</sup> Andrea Reiter (2000: 16) cites Fritz, M. *Essig gegen den Durst. 565 Tage in Auschwitz-Birkenau* (Verlag Für Gesellschaftskritik, Vienna, 1986, p. 42).

<sup>6</sup> A custom among forced labourers, when temporarily unsupervised and therefore not working, was to appoint a watchman who would warn of the return of the overseer by calling out a number; in Karmel's narrative 'Six' was the warning.

<sup>7</sup> Lillian Fadermann (1985: 323) states that 'In "The Sexual Aberrations" Freud divided women who love women into "butches" and "femmes"... He declared that "the active invert" generally exhibited both physical and mental masculine characteristics and looked for femininity in her love object'. She cites Freud, S. *Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex* (1905) *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud*, tr. A. A. Brill (Modern Library, New York, 1938; no page reference is given).

<sup>8</sup> Claudia Schoppmann (1996: 21) suggests that lesbian women, incarcerated as asocials, may well have been forced into prostitution as the Nazis perceived this would "cure" them.

## Chapter 5

### SUSAN FROMBERG SCHAEFFER: *ANYA*

#### 5.1 Susan Fromberg Schaeffer's vision of Holocaust motherhood

In Karmel's novel, motherhood is lethal. We gain no knowledge of the afterlife of Alinka's unnamed child, by which Aurelia's death might be redeemed. In *Anya*, motherhood is represented by the narrator as the reason why she survived. Further, the physical and psychic nourishment given Anya by her own mother was, she believes, crucial to her survival. Yet it is a disfigured survival; her own mothering is increasingly destructive and manipulating as her daughter Ninka tries to achieve individuation. The novel suggests the psychic damage of survival is passed on to at least the second generation of survivors. It anticipates the central theme of Cheryl Pearl Sucher's novel *The Rescue of Memory*, to be examined in chapter 6 of this thesis.

##### 5.1.1 Genre and narrative voice

Fromberg Schaeffer's novel, first published in 1974, is categorised by Marlene Heinemann as employing a 'self-effacing' narrative strategy and 'producing a mimetic (in Northrop Frye's terminology) version' of incarceration (1986: 47). Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi terms it 'a form of realism or naturalism which posits as morally acceptable the appropriation of the Holocaust through the autonomy and primacy of facts' (1982: 216). Berel Lang's objections to Holocaust fiction centre around the contention that literary 'artifice' tends 'to become conceit, and the writer's intervention... draws attention away from the subject itself' (1990: xi-xii). Ezrahi, equally concerned with fictional misappropriations, concedes that in such novels as this, scholarship and testimony '[provide] compensation for the existential distance' between author and subject (1982: 215). Dorothy S. Bilik inexplicably describes the novel as 'a romance depicting life as it ought to have been', employing the 'literary conventions and allusions' of fairytale to render 'twentieth-century evil... more ugly and inexplicable'. Yet arguably the 'idealized' lives of its 'courageous, admirable characters' (Shapiro (ed.), 1994: 371) reflect not so much fairytale (unless Bilik was thinking of the surreal cruelties of the brothers Grimm) as the traumatising of their narrator, Anya, looking back from the year 1973 over a ruined life: 'I am not whole. There are chunks of flesh the war bit from me' (1994: 565). *Anya's* narrative voice in many places replicates the barely organised vision of the survivor as embodied in oral narrative. As Heinemann states, 'Some... memoirs seem much less credible than the novel *Anya*, because



genre is only one among a whole series of criteria which contribute to authenticity in Holocaust texts: characterization, perspective, description and their relation to factual truth' (1986: 120).

*Anya* presents incarceration on two levels. At one level we encounter the limited insight and partial viewpoint of the first-person narrator. The greater part of the novel is flashback, screened through the lens of Anya's psychological damaging. Informing the narrative, however, is the author's own contemporary perspective, foregrounding the role Anya's gender has played, both in her experiences and in her representation of them. Anya's exaggeration of her feminine identity reflects the values of her patriarchal culture. Fromberg Schaeffer represents Anya as a survivor whose gender brought down particular catastrophes on her, as well as failing to cushion her from starvation and hard labour in the way she was taught that it should. It failed to confer upon herself and her child the protection which is a central reward of patriarchy to women. *Anya* reflects, indeed, it contributes to, the increasing awareness of the importance of gender in the Holocaust. In the novel, as in Karmel's, sexism is represented as the everyday praxis of the Nazis' racial ideology. Crucially, however, we see the many ways in which it predated the Nazis' misogyny.

#### 5.1.2. The themes of *Anya*

The twinned themes, then, are racism and misogyny: Anya is 'A woman and a Jewess' (39). Anya's femininity – particularly her beauty – endangers her when "passing" as Aryan, or conversely when her male interlocutors do not believe that a blue-eyed blonde can possibly be Jewish. At such times her Jewishness saves her from sexual assault. At all times her Jewishness puts her in danger; except when she uses her looks to persuade her captors that she is Aryan– So Anya ricochets between sexist and racist stereotypes.

This doubled persecution is enacted above all on mothers. Mrs Savikin embodies the memory of the entrenched European antisemitism which caused the family to flee Russia. During the pogroms she was hidden in a closed coffin: 'the coffin maker had us all dressed in shrouds, and I am so pale, I still am, you can see it, yes?' (1994: 28). Her brother, who would not hide with her, was killed. She is a living *memento mori*. Through Anya's vision of herself in a coffin in the framing narrative which encloses the flashback (6), we see that the present-day Anya has become completely identified with her mother; she too has become a living reliquary. Mrs Savikin educated Anya in Russian and Polish folktale as a means of comprehending and narrating her life; Anya follows the same pattern with her daughter. These fail to act as tutelary narratives because their archaic consciousness cannot comprehend *modern* atrocity. While the Savikin family, assimilated and cultured like Hana Pravda or Zdenka Ehrlich, do not envision the consequences of Nazi antisemitism, it is Mrs Savikin, however, who, relating current

persecution to Jewish history, comes nearest to anticipating its consequences. 'I think we're living through biblical times... when you are... the living will come to envy the dead' (175-6). When Anya's father tells his wife that "there is such a thing as the fate of a human being. You can't believe, after everything we've seen, that you are responsible for everything in the world", in a startling replication of Gilligan's findings (see chapter 2, p. 18) Mrs Savikin retorts that "There is no such thing as fate... there is only responsibility!" (61).

The precariousness of Anya's status as a doctor parallels the family's tenuous status as Jews in Poland. Here, the theme of doubled persecution exerts its hold. When Anya's mother explains to her physician that 'her lovely daughter wanted to be a lovely doctor' he 'looked grave. A woman and a Jewess' (1994: 39). As racial persecution closes all professional alleys, cultural expectations of feminine conformity enclose Anya like the walls of an invisible ghetto. Motherhood for Anya represents both the annihilation of her independent identity *and* her reason for surviving the Holocaust; Mrs Savikin, selected for death, screams at her: "You will live! You have someone for whom to live!" (248). When Anya's attempts to abort her first pregnancy fail, an accidental fall succeeds. However, her reluctant entry into marriage is punctuated by such "accidents". With the birth of her child, even though 'this baby I didn't want became everything' (141), her ambivalence surfaces again in the "accidental" loss of a huge and hideous medal her mother-in-law gives her as a reward for her motherhood. In the storm-centre of the Holocaust, Anya conceals Ninka with a Polish couple. Her desperation to be reunited with her daughter, to heal her shattered childhood, forms the imperative of her escape from Kaiserwald camp and from the ruins of postwar Europe. Yet motherhood is still the site of ambivalence; in America, she aborts a child conceived in her second marriage. Motherhood to Anya primarily represents increased vulnerability to persecution.

### 5.1.3. Characterisation: the novel as *version* or *vision*?

How might one characterise Anya? She possesses two identities. Anya the narrator in 1973 inscribes the identity of the Anya who experiences the Holocaust. If, as this thesis suggests, the self-dramatising character presents a less authentic view of the Holocaust – *version* rather than *vision* – where can we site these Anyas? Is there a radical divergence between the two? To what extent, as Joan Ringelheim suggests (chapter 3, p. 62) does the narrator mythologise her younger self in order to give her survival a meaning, as she is clearly at pains to do, even to the extent of invoking supernatural purpose ('Always I felt this hand over me' (564)?

It is clear that the narrator does not view her Holocaust identity in a self-dramatising light. The egocentricity of the prewar Anya is systematically undermined by growing antisemitism; culminating in the shattering realisation that her individual identity counts for nothing in the face



of racist misogyny, culturally sanctioned. Nor does the mature Anya attempt to represent her survival as a tale of resistance. She states that 'If there were ethical lives, and I believe mine was one, it was a matter of fate. It was my character' (563). The novel suggests throughout that her identity resides more in her gender than in her Jewishness: she is a woman *and* a Jewess. Within the incarceration caused by her Jewishness, it is her gendered identity that governs Anya's actions.

Anya's resourcefulness during incarceration is represented as being the means by which she survived. She emerges from the Holocaust, however, with conflicted beliefs about the meaning of survival. Anya is an unreliable narrator. Clearly aware of her own instabilities, she does not trust *herself*. The Holocaust enacted a rift in her identity. She is 'not the same person' as her prewar self: 'I was a person who loved, who trusted, who never accepted defeat' (565). If the primary characteristic of survival literature is the reversed *Bildungsroman*, the 'process by which civilized life had shrivelled to bare existence and was then pitifully resurrected out of the ashes' (Ezrahi, 1982: 67) then this novel presents such Holocaust *vision*. Heinemann indeed identifies the novel as 'a truncated *Bildungsroman*' (1986: 52). If the prewar Anya is dramatised by her mature self, it is only to show the extent of her psychic disfigurement. As Ringelheim states: 'The Holocaust is a story of loss, not gain' (Rittner and Roth, 1993: 387). Rather than dramatising her young self, Anya at times *mythologises* this self. To this extent, the prewar narrative is *version*. By the time the Savikin family enter the Holocaust, the novel has become a bleak vision, endorsing testimonies of actual survival. Anya is in many ways an embodiment of the women's experiences examined in chapter 3, employing many of their strategies to preserve her own life and those for whom she takes responsibility, her mother – in a reversal of roles similar to Edith Baneth's – her friend Rachel, and Sonya, the woman to whom she becomes a "camp sister".

#### 5.1.4. Before the Holocaust: ideal fictions of womanhood

Perhaps the best categorisation of this novel is that it is a fiction about the fictions of womanhood. If the survivor Anya represents the horrors of the Holocaust authentically, her narrative of childhood can be seen as an overcompensation. It is as if she – and her mother – attempt to erect a rampart of *things* against terrors past and to come. Yet before we can enter, in flashback, into this 'prelapsarian' time (Kremer, 1999: 121) we encounter the post-Holocaust Anya, in recurrent dreams stacking her dead, 'naked and streaked with blood', like 'logs for a stove, one row this way, the next row at right angles to the first' (5) in a way which recalls the grisly sorting and stacking of gassed bodies 'according to their combustibility' which Filip Müller, a survivor of the Auschwitz *Sonderkommando*, describes in his memoir (1979: 98). Anya is

persecuted by her dead in these dreams. Her first husband Stajoe is 'a jealous man, very jealous'. "I came to take you," he said. "It is enough. He has had you all this time. You are my wife." (4). Her dead, who personify her own guilt at surviving them, threaten her present; waking from these dreams she suffers headaches; she is 'very lonely' (6). While they drain her energy in their vampire-like preying, they are seductive; Stajoe, like some ballad demon lover, claims that with him "your life will be luxurious. It will make up for the past" (5). Anya's memories of her childhood are crammed with detail, as if to smother present reality and silence these voices; her bed has 'hundreds of little pillows, each in different materials' beside 'huge down pillows, each as wide as the bed' (17-18). Her sister Vera's room contains, along with a grand piano, 'sheet music, millions of sheets, *all over, all over*' (19). The description of the apartment and its contents runs to five and a half pages. Through her childish exaggerations we see how in thrall Anya is to this past, when her present days are merely 'empty and gray, or empty and blue' (5). Anya occupies a liminal state much like that described by Baneth (chapter 3, p. 86).

Kremer claims that in the 'vibrant social-cultural tapestry of pre-Holocaust Vilna' the reader encounters an 'idealized family' (1999: 121) whose existence is Edenic. To this extent, it is also mythic. The Savikins are refugees from Russian pogroms; as they appear to have an exaggerated trust that this cannot happen to them again, there is simultaneously an intuition that it will. Many incidents occur which uncannily prefigure the Holocaust. This constant suggestiveness of coming terror marries narrative realism, with its abundance of concrete detail, with magic realism even as it replicates history. The Savikin family's apparent ignorance of the meaning of these premonitory signifiers is symbolic of the prewar European Jewish middle-class, blinded by their own Enlightenment values to the possibilities of atrocity yet who, paradoxically, are familiar with persecution as a central element of their cultural heritage.

The pre-Holocaust narrative is punctuated by images of bodily disfigurement which are both linked to past persecutions and premonitions of the Holocaust. These disfigurements are enacted on women's bodies. Mrs Savikin is transformed into a peasant to escape the soldiers of the White Guard who during a pogrom systematically rape Jewish girls (28). Her father even meditates knocking out her 'beautiful teeth, like pearls' (31), so great is the danger to which her femaleness, and in particular her beauty, exposes her. The copious descriptions of the Savikins' apartment, its furnishing and care, refer to the construction of female space; primarily, it is Mrs Savikin's, as if it represents *her* overcompensation for her persecution. The provisioning of the family's summer *dacha* and their Vilna apartment for winter are feminine tasks, redolent with prescience, linked always to atrocity. The sawn logs are 'a guarantee of warm winters, songs on the white couch, the story of Momma smeared with dirt coming from Paltava'. Ezrahi suggests that the 'stripping away of the objects of a comfortable, civilized life' represents the disintegration of identity, 'the gradual denuding of the human soul of all its material and affective supports' (1982: 74). In *Anya*, this process reflects the loss specifically of feminine identity. Even



objects, when they suffer attack and disfigurement, are *feminised*: a bombed building 'for a moment... stood intact, then slid to the ground like a mud pack leaving a face' (155).

Mrs Savikin's 'sauerkraut obsession' (48), her stockpiling of food, is represented as a feminine 'disease'. While she does so, Mr Savikin reads Pushkin. Here, as elsewhere, he is a marginal figure, accorded less significance than the 'hundred and fifty pounds of potatoes', the pickled watermelons, the 'two hundred pounds of flour, two kinds... one hundred pounds of sugar; all kinds of cereals, kasha, everything' (49). The two brothers, like the father, are background figures, of less interest than the preparations for Chanukah and the making and fitting of clothes. Yet this female space is enclosed within a masculine construction symbolic of the family's persecution. The building was 'planned and built' (13) by a relative; when he was shot in Russia, the Savikins had to fight the Polish government to retain even an apartment in it. As Biber states, the Poles needed no German lessons in antisemitism (Appendix II: p. 18). The apartment which houses the apparently secure feminine environment in which Anya grows up is thus itself *insecure*. As Hana Pravda came to realise, while Jewish graveyards and synagogues founded in the eighth and ninth century signified the Jews' long-standing tenure in Europe it did not stop their annihilation (Appendix VI: 92). Alvin Rosenfeld suggests that readers 'inevitably "complete" [Holocaust narrative] by bringing to the text material it does not contain' (1988: 16); *Anya* contains clear hints of coming atrocity which the reader identifies but which the characters appear to misread. A storm of hail '[hammers] at the windows as if the house were being stoned'. And 'whenever this happened, Momma would give a shudder, and look at the window and say, "The Jews are chosen, but they are very unlucky."' (25). The wagon piled high with the paraphernalia of a summer holiday is 'like an eviction on wheels' (37). As these metaphors accumulate, the obsessive stockpiling of things now appears less as Ezrahi would have it, a 'naive confidence in the perpetuation of present reality, [a] lack of desire or ability to prepare for contingencies' (1982: 75) than a subconscious warding-off. It has an almost uncanny parallel in Zdenka Ehrlich's reaction to her father's arrest, when she ate all the food remaining on the table from the family's interrupted meal 'like a locust... out of sheer fear, frustration, anger, something I can't explain. Absolutely what there was disappeared' (Appendix IV: 38).

Anya's adolescence links signifiers of the Holocaust with the loss specifically of feminine innocence in a fundamentally misogynistic culture. Entering medical school, she faints and bursts into tears at the sight of a cadaver for dissection: 'The faces of the other three boys stare at me like judges' (56). '[S]oon I sit next to the dead body, eating a tuna sandwich' (58). Images of whiteness, which signified her mother's deadness, begin also to point to Anya's unease with her own female identity, and the emotional anaesthetising which is Anya's method of repressing these anxieties. She loses weight: 'I began shrinking like an icicle in the sun' (67). Her snow-queen blonde beauty becomes metaphoric of her coldness and calculation. She dresses her body as a commodity when applying to enter medical school; she uses it to 'trap boys' (40). Yet as she does so she is commodified. To trap boys, she sits in a café window exposed again to



their judgmental gaze; at the tables are 'telephones with huge numbers, so someone could see you and ring for a date' (40). Inevitably the reader envisages the final loss of identity – the tattoo – in this reduction of Anya to numbers.

Anya's joyous experimentation with the different surfaces of adolescence – examining her nude body, trying on furs – is abruptly terminated. In a pivotal passage in the novel, Anya is warned by her father that "some stupid boys have started a kind of pogrom of the Jewish students, the girl students." Right away, it was as if I were turned to ice. Our university had many beautiful Jewish girls' (68). Now women becomes the object of the linked sexism and racism discussed in chapter 1 (see p. 11). If a woman is beautiful, the danger is intensified. "The [boys] have iron nails attached to their hands, very pointy and sharp, and their goal is to go after the faces of the beautiful girls, and demolish them." (68). The attack is not limited solely to maiming the Jewish girl who is sleeping with a non-Jewish student against his parents' wishes. She has 'deep scratches like tracks' (69) torn in her face. 'The next morning, we heard she had thrown herself under a train, but she was not killed; her arms and legs were cut off, and this is how her parents got her back and took her in again, their beautiful daughter' (69). This incident in its weirdly symmetrical horror escapes its historical specificity to become parable: a woman's surface indicates her worth. The destruction of her beauty equates with maiming, death. Yet the train imagery keeps before the reader's eyes the tracks leading into the Holocaust. Constantly the novel represents women in this doubled jeopardy.

Anya obsesses about 'the girls whose faces had been ruined by the iron nails: What had it felt like?' (72).

I pressed my four fingers of each hand under my eyes... "Pull down," I ordered myself; "pull down." I pressed in; it hurt. It hurt terribly. "Press harder," I ordered my hands, *as if they were soldiers obeying commands*. I pressed harder. I couldn't bear the idea of the scratches, the red stripes down my cheeks. But I had to know what it felt like.

"Am I going crazy?" I thought to myself; "I must be going crazy." Terrified of something squirming inside, I pressed my hands to my side (72-3, emphasis added).

She chooses a place where the marks would be 'invisible':

my hand slid to just below my pants. I pressed down with one nail; I dug it in, and in. "I'm crazy, I'm crazy," I kept saying to myself, but I was drawing my nail down, almost two inches; it had gone through the skin. The dampness of blood was against my finger. The pain was blinding. So this is what it had been like, and forever, the scars forever on the face, and worse, it must have been worse, they must have been beaten, some of them must have lost eyes: I pictured scars running through eyebrows and lips; jagged ones, straight ones. The pain in my thigh was screaming with its open mouth (73).

Women's beauty and sexuality are the sites of racist attack. Anya's self-mutilation constitutes her initiation into this female identity fraught with horror, where sexual women are branded, their faces mutilated until they resemble blind genitalia. Anya, both wanting to be sexual and to avoid this devastating retribution, becomes self-divided; her fingers become masculine, turned against her femininity. Anya transforms this self-injury into a rite of passage which isolates herself from her family as a first menstruation might: 'This was the first time I couldn't talk to Poppa' (73).



Anya's cheerful evasions and downright lies signify the beginning of adulthood. That this identity is governed by patriarchy is clear from Anya's view of herself:

Now things start moving faster.. It is very hard to describe, how there is change, and there is no change. In one minute I am the little doll, the blond doll, five feet tall, with the thick blond braids, revolving like the figure on top of a music box on the bedroom chest of my parents, and the movement is slow, determined by their hands, for they decide when to wind it, and my existence is determined by them, by my father, who gave the box to my mother... And at other times the little figure is not on top of a music box, but something big, a barn or a church, and the night sky is torn with lightning (54).

Here again, approaching womanhood is twinned with Holocaust signifiers; art lessons spent '[drawing] railroad tracks in perspective' lose their innocent quality: 'there is a moment when the train appears, *when there is no longer any question at all*, and the closer it gets the faster it moves; then it is rushing upon you, stopping in a scream of brakes and steam' (55, emphasis added). Langer describes such 'transition' imagery as 'standard fare for much literature of atrocity' (1977: 81). Anya here is describing her approaching adulthood; inevitably the reader conflates this with the approach of persecution. The construction of the Savikin family here resembles the Ohrensteins' (see chapter 4, p. 95), in which women's choices are truncated as they are enclosed within marriage. Anya's father gave the signifier of patriarchal order – the box with the dancing doll on top – to his wife, who merely 'decides what jewels to take out, and when' (54). By the time she is nineteen Anya's feminine identity is frozen: 'I was very young; I knew I was very young. I was unusually mature and responsible in my career, but for the rest of me it was somewhere behind, travelling in a peasant's wagon trying to catch up' (86). This invokes Mrs Savikin's own rite of passage into adulthood, fleeing from rape in peasant disguise. When their maid is drugged with vodka and made pregnant, Anya's sister sings a folk-song 'about the woman who had been raped, and was rocking her child, promising her she would be taught to hate men from her days in diapers' (62). Each woman's transition to womanhood is haunted by such imagery.

What most of all prompts Anya to stall her marriage is the threat it poses to her career: 'I had my medical school, and I couldn't forget it had seemed so funny to Stajoe to see me working in my little office in Druzgenieke' (86). Her medical training also educates her in how catastrophic adulthood can be for women. A placement in a mental hospital shows her 'unwashed women with hair hanging like cooked macaroni, hanging, and jealousy, endless jealousy, unwinding like thread, weaving webs around everyone's ankles... I had never seen anything like this, this unending jealousy, this unending fear'. Like Anya as she wounds herself, the women are 'constantly asking, "Am I crazy? Am I really crazy?"' (87). Here too is a woman with a scarred face 'who sat in the corner with her back to the room' (87). Their madness is directly related to their gender. The women 'walking around all day, all day, saying, "She took him away from me; I'll kill her, I'll kill her. What does he see in her? I will get her, I will scratch her eyes out"' (87) are stereotypes of sexual rejection. Anya 'even preferred the men's side, where they exposed themselves, saying terrible things, where my face was always red' to the women's 'unending



jealousy, a terrible disease' (87), as if men's power to disfigure women is effaced from conscious memory. These men provide the clearest intimation of atrocity yet when they drown a doctor in a cauldron of soup (88).

Self-mutilations accompany Anya's reluctant journey into marriage. Falling from a horse she was warned not to ride, she injures her knee. She attempts to tan herself under a sun-lamp to the 'chocolate skin' she had when she met Stajoe; instead she burns her face until it is 'one huge blister' (94). This incident suggests connections both with the maimed student and a female tutelary figure whom Anya met in Druzgeniekie, an old woman always dressed 'in white linen, like a corpse that has risen' (75). Describing herself as "a vampire", she is a mythic figure: "I really only think at night... when the decay stops; can you understand?" She shows Anya photographs of herself as a beautiful young woman and tells her: "it is frightening what can happen to a human being" (81). The similarities of their names – Tania, Anya – suggest she is also an externalisation of Anya's own ambivalent ruminations about her marriage: 'the next day was the same thing: the picture came out, never refuse a husband, and, with some variation, it is frightening what can happen to a human being' (81). Anya, veiled after burning her face, briefly becomes herself such a figure of terror, a nun who frightens children on the street (94).

Anya's submission to marriage takes on a mythic quality. She runs out into a field in a thunderstorm, from which Stajoe rescues her: 'I stood there, my head a weather vane, turning this way and that... I was a lightning-rod; I was waiting for the white-hot strike' (92). Stajoe is represented as her refuge in the storm which kills a group of children in the same field. Yet marriage transforms women into targets of another kind in a culture in which men with no social prospects wrangle to obtain the best dowry (64), a woman is abandoned because her husband claims that her 'body smell' made him impotent and another is rejected by her fiancé because he sees 'hair between her breasts' (95). Travelling to Warsaw for her marriage, Anya encounters a woman who tells her that there are "disadvantages to being raised as a great beauty." One is "the weight of valuable objects hung about your neck". The woman wears an opulent red silk scarf, covered in surreally detailed embroidery done in gold thread; discovering Anya is about to be married, she gives this to her. "But you must love it!" I burst out... "I did, I did," She answered, smiling. "but now it's *your turn*. And my husband has a habit of saying we will soon have to give everything away" (97, emphasis added). This second tutelary figure suggests that beautiful women will carry especial burdens as *women* in the coming cataclysm.

At Anya's wedding images of past persecution and intimations of the Holocaust converge. Reminiscences over the Savikin family photo album lead to memories of the pogroms. The assertion that "It is good to die a normal death!" (112) is repeated to, and by, Anya as if it constitutes a family heirloom. The milestones of women's lives, marriage and birth, are twinned with mutilation and death. The night before her wedding Mrs Savikin sings Anya to sleep with



'the same song she had sung the night the girls were attacked by the boys' (113). They enter the synagogue like 'two invalids supporting each other, two women grown old together' (116); we envision the half-starved mothers and daughters, prematurely aged, approaching selection. Conventional signifiers of entry into married life – Anya finds her father-in-law inspecting her bedding for signs of lost virginity, she encounters 'women who had had to shave their heads after marriage' (119) – cannot be seen in isolation from the invasive searches and shavings of Auschwitz.

Anya fights against the death of individual identity which motherhood signifies: 'For three weeks I jumped off trolleys onto cement; for three weeks I pushed the big cabinet back and forth' (126). Yet the fall, and the subsequent stillbirth without anaesthetic, which remind the reader of the ghastly abortions in Birkenau, is occasioned by Stajoe. Imprisoned for evading military service, he insists on Anya's climbing 'five rickety flights of stairs in a deserted building' opposite his window so that he can look at her each day (128). His resumption of freedom finally imprisons her: "'So now," I thought, "we'll have a normal life, and next year, medical school." "So now," Stajoe said out loud, "we can have that boy." I didn't answer him' (136). With her next pregnancy 'The sentence had been passed' (139). This time, 'I didn't intend to do anything about it. "Let things take their course," I thought... I was defeated' (138).

#### **5.1.5. The Holocaust: a woman and a Jewess**

Primarily, the persecution Anya experiences with the occupation of Poland is sexual: shopping and gathering news initiates harassment by soldiers who hammer on the door demanding 'the daughter' (184). Frantic to locate her father after a mass arrest, she tears off her yellow star. 'I could hear the neighbours at Momma: "Mrs. Savikin, what is your Anya doing? You know where she'll wind up; she'll wind up in the whore house." Without my star, they would take me there if they caught me; Jews were not good enough for German soldiers' (190). However, persecution of women transcends race laws: 'Dark-haired girls' – stereotypically "Jewish" in appearance – were 'being dragged to the Praga Gardens... and raped, all day, all day' (170).

As did Mr Ohrenstein (see chapter 4, p. 97-8), men in the narrative become increasingly ineffective: 'We were all thinking the same thing: What is coming? Except Poppa. He still had his books' (189). Mr Savikin is taken up because he ventures out onto the street in dressing gown and slippers, without his star, in order to obtain a book from a neighbour. Stajoe arranges to hide himself, Anya and Ninka with 'a Christian woman' who 'knows about things before they happen; she's German. They probably planted her here' (194). He is not so much naïve as self-serving; when Anya refuses to go with him, leaving Ninka with her mother in the ghetto,

'[Stajoe] was furious. "But / am going to be saved," he retorted, turning red' (196). Ironically, ghettoisation frees women from some cultural constraints. As Anya and Mrs Savikin become joint heads of their ghetto family after Mr Savikin's execution; it is often Mrs Savikin's fine-tuned perception which saves them where men's attempts at securing privileges endangers the family. Now, she correctly suspects the motives of all male authority, Gestapo and Jewish: "why have you been to the Judenrat already?... Wait, they will send you an engraved invitation to Panari [Ponar]; there's no need to walk into the lion's teeth like a steak" (202). She persuades Anya and Stajoe not to volunteer for a work detail, which turns out to be mass execution at Ponar. Women's domestic skills, which might once have been seen as evasions of reality, now function to alleviate suffering and unite the fragment of the family. Anya states that 'really, we were not living in the narrow, filthy dangerous houses, but in the houses of each other' (213). Anya and her mother exchange mothering roles. It is Anya whose resourcefulness rescues them when the 'beautiful white room' provided for the families of Jews who work for the Gestapo, which Stajoe persuades them to move into (226), turns out to be a lethal trap. Anya's exploitation of her femininity suggests that it takes primacy over her racial identity with the Nazis.

The soldiers were looking in all directions, making sure no-one would escape. [One] was staring straight ahead, looking bored. I walked straight up to him. "Oh," I said, "I think you're a father, too? What do you have, a boy or a girl?" "Two boys," He answered. "Do you have pictures?" I asked. I kept on talking. "Here they are," he said, pulling some out. "Oh, such beautiful children!" I said, forcing myself not to hurry. "Ours are hungry. We don't know how to get to Polanska Street; we don't live here. Can you tell me how to get to Polanska Street?" "Just go straight through behind me," he said' (226).

When Warsaw is first bombed, Anya is training as a beautician. Her early marriage, characterised by the amassing of mountains of possessions, replicates her childhood, postponing reality: 'Things went along in the dream seen through the white veil' (124). The war temporarily recedes while Anya searches through Warsaw 'like Columbus planning the discovery of a continent' (120) for a particularly opulent bedroom suite. It is another death-in-life existence. Moving into the Holocaust, this identity is shown to be cosmetic: 'The war was peeling layers from our masks already' (153). It is Stajoe who, when their apartment is bombed, becomes feminised, curling up in their bed: "It is our nest". Anya, despite for a brief moment conferring life on their possessions – 'the toys flying with wings, the bed ripped through its belly, the quilts a flurry of feathers turning to embers in the high heat' – is the more realistic: "'Stajoe, what is it?" I shouted. "It's only satin and wood, furniture... It's only cloth, these things aren't alive"' (158). Without her mask of extreme femininity Anya functions as resourceful and determined. She is equally realistic about how humans can be reified. The invading Germans would 'swat [Stajoe] like a fly' (159). Encountering in the ghetto the possessions of the earlier occupants, driven out and shot, Anya realises that 'We were replacing other people... like pieces in a machine' (198).

Feminine identity increasingly resides in surface; it is a mask to be applied and renewed. Mrs Savikin, more than Anya, realises its importance. "'Anya," [Mrs Savikin] said, turning on me,



"what is the matter with your hair? A woman must always look her best, especially in the worst circumstances. Vera, what happened to your skirt? It's twisted halfway round your body" (202). Anya's rebellious enquiry: "'Why should I look like nothing's happened, Momma?" (212) is answered by numerous women's testimonies, for example Ryvka Salt's (Appendix VIII: 119); women's appearance had constantly to be monitored and enhanced by signifiers of "normal" femininity such as reddened lips and cheeks if they are to pass at selections. Edward Alexander's reading of this preoccupation with female surface demonstrates how superficial can be male critics' attention to representations of gender. To him, Mrs Savikin 'both understands and embodies the *naturalness* of custom [and] insists that even in the Vilna ghetto her daughter must comb her hair and put on lipstick if she wants to retain the *human* image and survive' (1979: 135, emphasis added). The custom of reworking a woman's surface with cosmetics is not *natural*; lipstick is certainly not an attribute of the *human* image but only of the female one: where in Holocaust literature do we read of sons being exhorted to wear lipstick to better their chances of survival?

While the ghetto is initially a place of somewhat greater freedom for women, it becomes the locus of atrocities which Fromberg Schaeffer represents as specifically directed against women: 'the soldiers came; they began lining everyone up on the streets. "Give the children!" they commanded all the women' (244). Men – apart from the Germans – are absent. Women's identities – and their fate – are now decided by their motherhood: 'All women with children were to be killed; they could not stay on the worklines' (247). For those spared like Anya and her mother – Ninka is now in hiding as an Aryan child – feminine surface is all that they will be judged by. "'Into the house," Momma said... "Go comb your hair and put on some lipstick. It wouldn't hurt to wash that face again. And don't forget to bring that piece of mirror down with you." "Please, Momma," I begged her, crying. "No crying; your eyes will get red". In this extremity Anya's face is a caricature of womanly surface: 'I combed my hair savagely and smeared on the lipstick' (245). Yet she tries the same desperate strategy on her mother:

Frantically I began combing her hair; she was yellow as skin painted with iodine... I had my lipstick out, I painted her lips, I smeared her cheeks... She stood still, like a good child. It did no good. She still looked a thousand years old... "How do I look?" Momma smiled at me ironically. "Am I still beautiful?" "Oh, yes," I said, sobbing, "yes, if you could only look happier." "I cannot look twenty-three," Momma answered' (248).

This thesis earlier examined Tadeusz Borowski's representation of women who attempted to evade their motherhood (see chapter 1, p. 4-5). Fromberg Schaeffer offers us a different perspective:

Some of the women... ran away from their children. "How could they do it?" I asked Momma. "Everything for life," she answered dully; "everything to live." "What are the soldiers doing to the children?" she asked me suddenly. Soldiers were carrying little children up and down the lines of women. One passed us. We heard him cooing, as if he were talking to his own child, "Where is Mommy? Where is Mommy? Show us where is Mommy."... the little child lunged forward; we could see a woman move and cower back. The soldier with the child pointed at her; another pulled her out. The first handed her the child. "Both, to the death lines!" he ordered, bored... One woman in our line was crouched



down in back of us. "She must have left a child," Momma whispered after it was over; "see how she hid herself? So she is saved, and this is how it is." (247).

Kremer terms Borowski's a 'male-authored scene' (1999: 129). Here women are not condemned as 'degenerate mothers' (Borowski, 1976: 43) by Mrs Savikin; they are shown as imperilled by their motherhood.

Anya's induction into the 'infamous' Kaiserwald labour camp (Feig, 1983: 170) is a synthesis of all the abuse experienced by the women whose testimony was examined in chapter 3. They are doused in gasoline "for the lice"; they are told to "stoop over when the men get to you; they have to check your rectums for ringworm and bleeding; it's for your own good, only for your own good" (261). Fromberg Schaeffer exposes the Nazis' own medicalisations as disguises for sexual attacks. As an "old" prisoner later tells Anya: "Why do you think they're threatening gynecological examinations; they're worried about our insides?" (274).

"So," one [soldier] said approaching me, "lice, eh?" He pinched my nipples. "And how is this, after the trip, all dirty, eh?"... and then the next man came along and it began again. My breasts were so sore I could feel the pain in my toes... "So," one of the men said when they finished, "we will take your clothes; they're filthy – I'm surprised at you girls, your age, too – and we'll give you some of ours, but first, because of the lice – we can't have that here, in a clean camp – we take care of your hair." (261).

When another girl, Sonya, 'wasn't too energetic' about wiping off the gasoline a man 'scoured her himself, paying special attention to her breasts and vagina' (262). Kremer terms this process 'pornographic sadism', where 'offenses [are] transparently mischaracterized as medical procedures... that simultaneously sexually assault the victims and strip them of feminine attributes' (1999: 133). For her, 'racism and sexism characterize the guards' strategy for forcing their victims to realize their utter loss of autonomy' (132).

In this particular passage, Kremer believes, fiction confers an immense advantage: 'The novelist's selection and arrangement of detail and her focus on assaulted female anatomy impart an even more effective understanding of the humiliation and degradation imposed on the women than does the survivor's powerful but objective, less lurid account' (132-3). Without the need to protect herself against agonising personal memories Fromberg Schaeffer can allow her narrator correctly to name processes which, for their self-protection, survivors such as Brunstein often cannot (Appendix III: 31). Moreover, 'the survivor-historian's description focuses on the commonality of experience men and women endure'; fiction such as this 'specifically genders the humiliation with emphasis on women's vulnerability' (Kremer, 135). Anya states that 'We were all young women, eighteen, maybe twenty-four or -five at the oldest, such beautiful bodies, standing there in front of the barracks, completely naked, our heads shaven as if we were lunatics, or the most dangerous murderers... I didn't need the mirror; looking at the others, I knew what I looked like' (Fromberg Schaeffer, 262). Survivors such as Perl (1992: 30) specifically cite the *beauty* of women's bodies as the focus of atrocity. The deliberate mismatching of clothing becomes a last cancellation of the women's individual identity; they no



longer posses any feminine worth, 'devalued now, like the last regime's currency' (Fromberg Schaeffer, 263).

As did Zdenka Ehrlich and Hertha Spier, Anya smuggles into the camp small signifiers of her identity: a 'little packet of photographs' of Stajoe and herself, 'the mirror, the comb and the lipstick' (262) with which – like Edith Baneth – she attempts to preserve her identity. Within Kaiserwald, many elements of women's testimony are again replicated fictionally. Anya adopts Sonya as her "camp sister", telling her stories, grieving with her, securing them a top bunk away from the barrack door; she has been told 'how they could come and get you at any time' (264). After the male SS officer reels off the list of rules, Rosa tells Anya: "'I've been here a long time, so ask; you have questions'" (266). Rosa glosses the rules with the atrocities they conceal: the hospital where women are made sicker, the guards who push women into the electric fence, the malnutrition which gives the women abscesses. Menstruation figures as a specific threat: "'it's better here without it... It gives you cramps, you can't work. It's just danger, danger, danger.'" (269). While the 'Kaiserwald scenes... forgo the horrors of Auschwitz, its medical experimentation and torture blocks, its Zyklon B shower rooms and crematoria' (Kremer, 1999: 135), coded references to the death-camps abound. Rosa warns Anya: "'I don't recommend the shower here much, no, I don't recommend it'" ((267). When Anya refers to the 'endless counting' of the prisoners 'As if we were precious jewels' (277) we are reminded of the mocking camp argot which equates the near-moribund women, the *schmuckstücke*, simultaneously with precious jewels and garbage (Levi, 1989: 77). This theme of women's mutual assistance predominates. Rosa protects Anya from the jealousy of the other women in her barrack when she is given privileged work. Anya trades a smuggled needle for food for Sonya and Rachel. These two women constitute her "camp family". Swiftly she learns to "organise", trading bread for bits of rag to conceal her menstruation.

Heinemann suggests that 'By giving Anya both beauty and a non-Jewish appearance, Schaeffer suggests that both can be significant assets for a woman as well as magnets of specific kinds of danger' (1986: 54). In Kaiserwald, they enable Anya to shed her Jewish identity; she becomes Russian in order to secure privileged work as a cleaner in the camp commandant's household. Her helper is another mythic figure. Kremer finds that Erdmann, the Jew disguised as a Nazi officer 'has precedent in Holocaust history' yet is 'the most far-fetched' piece of 'fictional invention' in the work, 'reflective of the American tendency to privilege individual heroism'. Erdmann's persona is unrealistic: '[he] neither harms Jews nor speaks ill of them in the company of fellow officers' when realistically, 'Nazi pretense' is tied to 'public Jew-baiting' (1999: 137). Anya herself poses as antisemitic while trying to locate her father after the Vilno massacre. In her relationship with Erdmann, gender and racial identities initiate a complex discourse between them that becomes almost farcical. Singled out for privileges, Anya accuses him of playing with her life, 'too angry to be afraid. Why did these people have so much power over me?'. Here again the threat is primarily sexual: "'If I am going to be a maid," I said,



suspicion finally dawning on me, "what do I have to do for it? I only clean; I don't provide other services" (279). Erdmann is limited by his own fiction of racial identity: "they would kill us or send us to the front if they found us with a Jewish woman, please." "You told me they think I'm a political prisoner," I reminded him... "They wouldn't stop to make distinctions," he said flatly' (279). In an echo of Klaus Theweleit's extensive study, Fromberg Schaeffer's narrative suggests that in its paranoia Nazi ideology regards *all* women as a threat to men's purity.

Holocaust reality is not submerged by these almost comic by-plays of identity. Anya has to undertake *brutal labour* filling gasoline canisters: 'The first time I tried to move a canister, I thought I would crack in half at the waist' (270). Hunger is so great that the women kill another prisoner caught stealing bread; the same night all the barracks are locked and the neighbouring one is set alight. Anya is brutally beaten for smuggling food. Yet even within this extreme locus some women can develop an individual identity they did not possess within their prior culture. Reunited with Rachel, Anya reflects: 'How she had changed! She was stronger than I had ever seen her; it was as if she had found a purpose' (284). Rachel, once obsessed by marriage, has been separated by the Holocaust from the ne'er-do-well husband who haggled over her dowry. Now she appears as resourceful and independent as Anya; she is better nourished, having already secured a favourable work detail (284). She explains her ambition to train in medicine specifically in terms of reversing atrocity: "It's a miracle, medicine... the same things, knives spilling blood, cutting out this and that, and instead of death you get life... I just don't want to die if I could learn to do that" (308). Her new sense of herself stems from Mrs Savikin's nurturing of her in the ghetto. Rachel tells Anya: "'You know, I'm not so jealous as I used to be. I wonder what did it?' 'Probably my Momma,' I sighed. 'She never left anyone out; I never remember wanting anything'" (309).

Anya's incarceration might be seen as orchestrated by the *magic realism* which informed the prewar narrative. Enzo Traverso, however, describes the Final Solution as 'a hybrid of organisation with anarchy, of extremely detailed planning of each segment with an overall chaos completely out of control' (1999: 55). Many other narratives endorse Fromberg Schaeffer's narrative contradictions, whereby Anya can be concussed for 'slumping' in the food queue (273), brutally whipped for smuggling two eggs and yet in her guise as a Russian political prisoner can be on friendly terms with Nazi officials, escaping punishment when she spills soup on a tablecloth, being told to lie down in a Nazi official's bedroom when she begins menstruating – an "offence" for which the officer himself is shot. The Anya smartly dressed in maid's uniform, wearing rouge and lipstick, escapes punishment; it is the Anya who sleeps in the squalid barrack who suffers for the slightest misdemeanour. More than ever, women's surface constitutes their fate, in Kaiserwald, Anya is literally taken at face value.

Kremer, like Marlene Heinemann, believes that resumed menstruation can signify 'regeneration'; at the same time the 'awkwardness and danger of bleeding' can attract



'unwanted attention' (1999: 138). Anya's intuition that escape on a particular day will be successful is linked to her returning menses: "I have a feeling," I said, the paper dampening between my legs' (307). Immediately on escape, she bleeds again; this time, the blood transforms her into a target. "My blood," I thought to myself, "all over Riga, a trail, like in 'Hansel and Gretel'" (316). Almost all feminine signifiers in the novel carry an underlying threat. Anya becomes a virtual shape-changer; no surface sticks to her for long. Disguised as an elderly hunchback to get out of Kaiswerald, she poses in turn as the wife of the man who has Ninka in hiding; as a gentile, a Christian. Her resourcefulness enables her to shed her assumed identities as a moment's notice; the cost is her own identity. The thread of coincidences which begin with the finding of a gold crucifix, a 'magic thing' (294) whose symbolism she studies like an alien text, unravel her Jewish identity. Anya feels 'as if the street had turned into part of that scarf, and I was following one of its threads into the church. I felt like a needle being stitched through material' (317). The persona which is fabricated for her is alien, however; the metaphor of passivity suggests Anya possesses as little agency outside Kaiserwald as she did during her transformations of identity within the camp. As in Karmel's novel, the Holocaust has become all-pervasive (see chapter 4, p. 99).

#### 5.1.6. Post-Holocaust regeneration: an amputated life

Walking through Riga, Anya notes that 'War had not touched this city' (321); 'The world was not destroyed... It was as if every dark house was a seed pod, every lit window a seed about to crack open... In the camp, I had come to believe that nothing existed outside its *invisible* walls' (322, emphasis added). This metaphor of rebirth is inverted when Anya revisits Kaiserwald after the war: 'I would be forever attached to this camp by an invisible umbilical cord, infinitely elastic and infinitely strong, one that could never be cut; I would forever be one of its inmates'. The earth is 'swallowing' the physical remains of the camp yet its walls have become internal: 'What [the earth] took in, it broke down and used; what I took in stayed as it was... What I took in built great walls... in paths of my mind. I was losing so much everyday' (425).

Hiding in an oven in the house where Ninka is living as a Christian child, Anya metamorphoses into her dead mother, who was once concealed in such an oven in the Vilno ghetto. This warm womb cannot have any function as a place of regeneration now that "oven" signifies mass immolation. Here Anya, revisited with memories of atrocity, is reborn into her new, truncated identity: 'It came to me suddenly. My life was not continuous; it would never be continuous again. Something, the world, or history, had intervened like a terrible editor of a movie, snatching out handfuls of characters, changing the sets wildly, changing them back again' (353). Now she has become the architect of her own holocaust: 'And now my mind was



doing it, too, cutting pieces of the film randomly with clumsy scissors, without anaesthetic, and the victim never knowing anything had been taken' (354). Inevitably the reader envisions the ghastly sterilisations performed on unsuspecting women. While Anya's bodily fertility has returned her maternity is irreparably injured: 'I felt pure hatred for the child... If it wasn't for that miserable child who called Onucia Mommiti, and me, beggar, I could have spent the rest of the war at Madame Russo's, in complete safety' (352). Anya's relationship with Ninka embodies now 'the tension between maternal love and self-preservation' (Kremer, 1999: 140). This emotional injury is represented in a disturbing image of devitalisation: 'The valves of my heart opened; I was flesh and blood. They closed; I was stone, They opened when she [Ninka] came in; the rest of the time I might have been a cement angel standing on a tombstone' (354).

Ezrahi represents incarceration as 'a universe in which, since the individual counts for nothing, his death cannot possibly be sacrificial or exemplary' (1982: 69). The same is true for the death of the self. Livia Bitton Jackson records the experience of returning to school after nineteen months of incarceration: 'I am back where I left off nineteen months ago... The language of instruction is Slovak now, the entire faculty is new, and so is the student body' (1994: 261). Anya, surveying her reflection, washed and clothed normally for the first time since incarceration, experiences the same dislocation: 'Standing still, I started to sob; I was rooted to the floor. There I was, as if nothing had happened, as if I had only cut my hair.' (335). Anya's surface is all that remains of her prewar identity. After this, she rarely looks in a mirror. 'I knew what I would see, the woman who had left the big house with her family but whose eyes would never reflect anyone from the family again' (345). The death of her adolescent identity into marriage was given its cultural reward: the birth of a child and of mother-love. There is no cultural model which Anya can follow to give birth to a post-Holocaust identity. Her reunion with Ninka is effected amid a 'tower of Babel' (339) of different languages, Russian, Polish, Lithuanian. Not just mothers but motherhood itself, the narrative suggests, has been annihilated in the Holocaust. Anya gives her gold cross to Onucia, who in return gives Anya her own crucifix of iron: "'She says," the girl translated, "that when you exchange crosses you exchange fates"' (338). Anya's resumption of motherhood is effected by Onucia's being shot.

Ninka's identity likewise is deformed by the Holocaust. She undergoes an education in antisemitism. 'Mantele was busy drawing pictures for Ninka. "These are Jews," she was saying; "see the big horns, and the big noses? That's how you can tell them. Don't ever go near them; they eat you up." "Eat me?" Ninka asked, terrified' (340). Anya can only reprimand Onucia's relative in Russian; she cannot enlighten her daughter. Ninka can remember her real family only through stories and games: her beloved aunt has become a doll who is always asleep (341). Onucia states that 'nothing could be better for a child than two mothers', as if the individual bond counts for nothing. Holocaust imagery intrudes into Anya's relationship with her daughter: 'the jealousy was terrible; we moved through it like a poisonous gas' (342). Ninka is now represented by metaphors of ice and death. Signifiers of conventional motherhood are inverted;



when Ninka was born, Anya 'couldn't take my eyes off her' (141). Now Anya states: 'I couldn't stop watching her... I wanted to touch her every minute, to be sure she was real, not a snow child, not a child with skin made of snow which covered only decay and rot and skeleton, and could melt into the earth, leaving only patches, leaving the mud with its snow-speckled hide, not alive at all' (345). While Ninka is the 'living book', the 'photograph album' (352) of Anya's family history, she also embodies their deaths.

The Holocaust possesses the power to transform all symbols of regeneration, Norma Rosen argues. 'For a mind engraved with the Holocaust, gas is always *that* gas. Shower means their shower. Ovens are those ovens. A train is a freight car crammed with suffocating children: it arrives at the suburban station in a burst of power and noise, there is a moment of hideous hallucination that is really only remembering' (1992: 52). Anya states that 'Life is like a train constantly crossing the border from the past to the present... The war had transported the whole train into the future which looked the same as the past, where all the rooms were the same, and none of the people were the same and none of the people spoke the same language' (354). We see an image drained of any meaning except atrocity. It is the same inversion of positive signification – travelling hopefully – that is to be found in Karmel's narrative (see chapter 4, p. 116).

Carol Rittner and John Roth maintain that Auschwitz was 'not a woman's creation. Neither was... the Holocaust. The fact is that those realities existed because there were men like Hitler and Himmler, Heydrich and Höss, Kremer and Broad' (1993: 323). Anya's father, with his many abrogations of responsibility and his addiction to books, is conflated with Hitler in a piercing image of male powers of destruction:

My father was twirling the globe on his desk. Then he lifted the top from the bottom and picked up his letter knife... He sliced one inch from both halves of the globe, then pressed them back together. The world was no longer round but slightly oval. He pressed it as if it were clay; it became round again. But it wasn't the same globe. It was completely solid, but not the same. There was a seam, an incision; something important had been taken out. Poppa looked at it and shook his head. He lit a match and held it to the globe. It went up like newspaper. And the flames were spreading; soon they would reach the desk and curtains behind them, then the bookshelves. I woke up screaming (354).

Anya has always asserted that Hitler's *Mein Kampf* is 'really a fairytale' (91); in this vision, which has the force of a parable, any man unwilling to admit responsibility for his actions can be conflated with Hitler; even Anya's beloved father.

After the war ends, as Anya rambles through the ruins of Europe, where Jews are now being harassed by the Communists, it is primarily her femininity which once more endangers her. In her new housekeeping job, Anya is again in hiding, not because of her Jewishness but because a Russian soldier tries to rape her. Her next job in a laundry is 'soothing, very soothing. There were no men to hide from' (364). Changing jobs to work in a hospital, she is pestered by one of the doctors; when she refuses him, she is imprisoned for spying. When men help Anya, it is with



the expectation of sexual favours. Anya, moving from one hiding-place to another, once more resembles a concentration camp survivor, grossly swollen from oedema, starving, dehydrated. Overwhelmingly, one is reminded of Mrs Savikin, fleeing rape disguised as a peasant, yet for Anya there can be no resumption of her authentic identity. She assembles a parody of her dead family: Vladek, an orphan of fourteen, becomes a surrogate brother to Ninka. Reunited with the skeletal Ninka, Anya rejects her despite recognising, as in a passage from a folktale, the identifying mole on Ninka's shoulder: "Suddenly I was ripping her dress... There was the mark. 'It is there!' I screamed. 'It is not my child, it is not her... I don't care about the mark!' I was completely insane'. This Ninka is for Anya the inverse of her former self, 'a negative: Her hair was black, her skin was black, her teeth were black, the little wrinkles or streaks of dirt were white. Her back was all black except for one white mark on her shoulder' (394). Ninka accepts Anya with an ominous readiness; a mother is 'anyone with a suitcase' or food. "'Will you call me Mommy?' I asked her. 'Why not?' she asked, taking another cookie' (394). Ninka, like Anya, has to relearn their relationship; in the process unlearning her Holocaust identity where 'She was a Catholic and her mommy was named Onucia' (396): "'Ninka,' I told her slowly, 'you have some things to learn. A mother is more than something with a suitcase. I take care of you and love you; you do not throw me out on the floor the minute I am finished'" (396).

Normality is increasingly defined by inverted images. One Jewish woman survived by tearing up her identity papers; the Gestapo, assuming she was mad, let her survive. Anya's strategy has been broadly similar; tearing up one identity, one name, after another. Retrieved family mementoes reverse their signification, acting as material signifiers of their owners' annihilation. Emotionally she is as numb to them as if they had belonged to a stranger:

I opened the box: There was Momma's big diamond ring, and Poppa's diamond ring, and her pin, my diploma, my index from medical school, the pictures of Stajoe and me near the rock at Druzgeniekie. "Now I will have bandages and food for a while," I thought to myself. But something had escaped from the box like a dangerous gas. It was time, old time. I had to take care not to breathe it in (419-20).

These mementoes have undergone the novel's most calamitous reversal, becoming a kind of Zyklon B capable of destroying her precarious semblance of identity. Anya revisits Warsaw not to seek for living family members but to assure herself that they are dead: 'I'm tired of walking up to packages of clothing and finding the wrong face on top' (429). All traffic with the past is fatal to her present. 'I had opened all the graves. Now they were all walking around. I had to get them back in' (430). Her recovery is a process of *burial*, not retrieval, of her prewar self with its emotional attachments; now people are packages, objects are animated: in Warsaw 'every building looked like a dying patient, or a terribly sick one, waiting for help' (438). Finally leaving Poland, each street represents 'a flat tombstone' for each family member: "'I don't even know where their graves are!' I thought, agonized. We passed one street: Momushka. Another: Poppa. Another: Vera. Another: Mischa. Another: Emmanuel' (485). The names of living friends



left behind in Poland are interspersed with those of her dead, as if for Anya the past itself is to be annihilated.

In Warsaw Anya asks her driver where all the trees are. She is told the Germans killed them. "They weren't supposed to leave anything alive," the driver explained as if it made some kind of sense to him. "Trees?" I asked again. "Kill the trees; they went round blowing them up. And the furniture; they were supposed to kill all the furniture." "Kill all the furniture?" I echoed helplessly. "You know, couches, chairs, credenzas, kill them. There should be nothing left for people to come back to" (433). This inversion of normality signifies the postwar *Weltanschauung*. Anya realises that 'They didn't know the difference between what was living and what was dead. Now I had caught it, the disease. The dead were more real to me than the living' (434). When Anya locates Anzia, the Savikin family's former servant, 'Nothing about her had changed' while Anya herself is 'turned to stone' (453). "'Anyushka!' [Anzia] screamed, grabbing me. 'You are not alive?'" "Yes, I am," I said. "You are not alive!" she screamed again. "Yes, I am," I insisted, as if I had to persuade her'. 'Her life had continued; the earth had opened its alligator jaws and eaten whole chunks of mine, flesh, blood, everything. Perhaps she was right; perhaps I wasn't alive, or the same person wasn't' (453).

Anya's death-in-life is replicated on a larger scale. Europe, Fromberg Schaeffer suggests, has become contaminated by the signifiers of atrocity as whole populations wander, like Anya, occupying half-derelict buildings and displaced persons' barracks whose lavatories, in a horrific echo of concentrationary existence, are 'filled with urine up over our ankles; feces were swimming all over' (487). The husband of a dressmaker Anya visits turns out to be the Gestapo officer who tried to adopt Ninka after his colleagues murdered Onucia and her husband. Anya's emigration with Frederich and Julka, a former friend, constitutes a bizarre reversal of the stripping-away of possessions which occupied the first part of the novel. In the half-ruined house they share, the couple's ten vast packing-crates full of goods are suspended from hooks driven into the ceiling above people 'sleeping on the floor like sardines' (470). They are delayed again and again because Frederich is 'really so attached to his things' (469). Possessions now signify not tradition and family history but the greed of this couple obsessed with amassing money through smuggling and currency trading, prepared to cheat other refugees of food and finally to disown Anya and abandon Frederich's three year-old nephew Jerzy in Anya's care. Images of the Holocaust are replayed in a country not so much opposed to the Jews ideologically as interested in securing their fabled wealth. Instead of the Gestapo, the group are harassed by the N.K.V.D. Their constant searches terrify Ninka and Jerzy. Frederich and Julka exemplify the ruins of all European culture. Nothing about the couple appears authentic. Julka never reveals how they survived: "'I'd rather not talk about it, how we got out," Julka said. "It's slightly embarrassing"' (470).



All Anya possesses are memories, embodied in Ninka: "'But I have Ninushka," I thought, "and now I will forget. I have Ninushka; I have all of them' (485). Anya appears frozen, unable to fulfil any of her own needs or to accept gifts of food and clothing for herself or Ninka; she has resumed wearing the skirt and blouse in which she escaped from Kaiserwald. The future is 'a blank window; I'm looking out of a window, and nothing's there' (488). Her behaviour becomes increasingly eccentric; even in the wretchedly impoverished French zone of Berlin Anya deliberately makes her life harder, sleeping on the top of a stove until she again suffers from oedema, refusing to eat: 'everything I had, I gave to [Ninka], to her' (492). Anya realises that 'I've been lucky in everything but my mind' (489). Jealousy and suspicion continually wall her in a psychic ghetto, where the genuine philanthropy of a childless U.N.R.R.A. official – giving her food, arranging her exit to America – is construed as his desire to take Ninka from her. Mr Brodsky warns her that "'children are unthankful little pigs. You have to have your own roots; you can't wrap them around her... You'll count on her too much'" (508).

The skills Anya has acquired in reworking her identity, predominantly posing as a Catholic, aid her again and again, but no identity now is deeper than Anya's surface. Arrested by the N.K.V.D. she states that: 'Inside, I had turned to stone. My skin was about to slide off' (478). To the emigration officials, she appears neither Jewish nor Polish: "'just look at her. She is German." I sat there in my white dress, with my blond hair, crying... I kept pleading; "I am not German. I have my Polish *matritza*, even an index from the medical school in Vilno," I cried, taking them out. "Probably taken from a dead body or bought on the black market," the same man said cynically' (516). Many identities are assumed and discarded like this. On the boat to America, Anya's 'ark' (520), are Nazi families escaping Germany by claiming to be ex-prisoners. In the inversion of all prewar identities Anya and her persecutors have become each other. In other ways the Holocaust accompanies her to America. Her first vision of New York embodies both memories and her desire to forget: 'the sight of the big buildings wiped everything out of my mind; they were so many grey erasers. I had a sudden vision of Anzia curling the ruffles on the big pillows in my room with the curling iron, and then I walked out into the street, breathing its fish smell, my mind empty as a slate' (530). Bitterly she tells Max, an Auschwitz survivor, later her husband: "'Forget... the word doesn't exist'" (526).

Many fractures appear in the apparently solid fabric of America. Anya 'looked down at the cement sidewalk; there were no cracks in it, no slits, no ravines' (533); nevertheless when Sonia talks of the authorities 'liquidating' the kitchen where they eat because 'a new transport' is to arrive Anya turns 'white and cold' (533). When a stranger asks to adopt Ninka, Anya sees 'black armies... marching on the hotel, pounding on the doors' (535). The relentlessly cheerful narration of her acculturation – marriage to Max, resumption of her medical studies – is flawed by the appearance of fissures through which Holocaust memories resurface, which suggest the extent of Anya's and Max's alienation from the American culture where 'the whole air was filled with door after door' (539) of opportunity. The same disillusion is experienced by the Wallfisch



family in Sucher's novel (see chapter 6, p. 159). Anya's wedding to Max is a travesty of the opulent marriage to Stajoe: "It wouldn't be much of a wedding," he coaxed; "you'd hardly even notice it. You don't even have to love me." "I don't," I said bluntly' (535). When Anya becomes pregnant 'I spoiled it; I would not go through with it... "You're still a young woman," Max insisted; "you're only twenty-seven." "No," I insisted, "you said it yourself; after what we've been through, we should not be parents. How many times at night do we wake up screaming, thinking it's the Gestapo, or worse?" (540). Lawrence Langer quotes the memoir of a woman survivor, strikingly similar: 'I was pregnant with my second child and I didn't want it. I was afraid again... if he [her husband] was thinking to have a baby, I was angry at him. And I said, "Fine, I'm going to look how to get rid of it, the baby." And I went, I got rid'<sup>1</sup>.

Anya is haunted by a sense of life lived for nothing: 'What have I accomplished in my life? I ask myself this more and more, now that I have started opening the rooms to the house in the past which were kept locked so long' and where, 'now that I am fifty-two, I spend more and more time' (544). The rooms of her present are 'filled with the artificial snow of sealed globes... moving into them is like moving into an ice cube' (544). 'The film which has recorded the story of my life was spliced one third through to an irrelevant reel by a maniac' (545). Anya cannot resume her medical career, even as a nurse; flashbacks haunt her: 'If I am alone for even five minutes, whole sections of my life unfold in front of me' (545). Choiceless choice has become the metaphor for her life as a survivor. In a crucial passage she states: 'The whole world made my choices for me... how am I ever supposed to know what I would have done? My own failures, they don't even belong to me' (511). There is no choice, only *being chosen*: the Jews' history of 'endless persecution' was 'a form of being chosen' (549). 'I do not believe life is up to us, that we can make all the choices. Hitler chose for us. There was someone above him.' (547). Anya's belief-system seems to accord God a superior status to Hitler in the arbitrary, universal selection process which constitutes life: 'there are times when someone who has accomplished everything in life dies – our president, a king – I ask myself, "What for? What is it for?" To do so much and have it all taken away' (544). Anya's belief in a 'superpower... in fate' (547) seems to suggest an ominous rather than a redemptive meaning in this representation of survival, which is a constant interrogation of meaning.

This ontological sense of underlying atrocity spoils even her motherhood. Anya believes that 'If my Momma hadn't fed me so well... would I have survived?' (546) yet her obsessive nurturing of Ninka is unhealthy: 'It was like watching a rare flower grow. Sometimes, I think, if I were to tell the truth, I would have liked it like that, Ninka staying with me as my plants stay in the house' (546). Anya's own self-nurture is equally toxic: 'we have come to feed on our own bitterness, become suspicious, lose even more what we love' (547).

For Anya, the Holocaust is 'as inexplicable as an earthquake'. Her question, 'What have I learned?' echoes Zdenka Ehrlich's: 'You ask yourself what was it all good for? And you come

up with the answer, I don't know, not much. It can happen again. What was the point?' (Appendix IV: 51). Her explanations are merely simplifications: 'When it began, I remember thinking the war was a punishment for all the intermarriages... Sometimes I think it is a payment for our new country, for Israel'. Anya's thinking is dislocated: 'I am the biggest pacifist. When the television shows the Israelis taking cabs into Arab countries for retribution, I am so excited and overjoyed I can barely sit still' (548). Anya's statement that 'I believe [the war] had a purpose. I believe there was a hand over my head, shielding me' (539) may only be one of the 'simple answers that suit the weather of the day' (549) with which Anya consoles herself. Anya has 'learned not to believe in suffering. It is a form of death. If it is severe enough it is a poison; it kills the emotions'. It has 'absolutely no purpose; normal suffering, yes, but suffering like ours, perversion, no' (550). Yet she claims that 'Suffering is the best teacher... Everything I learned during the war I have never forgotten. How to survive' (551). The chaos that was the Holocaust has penetrated to the core of Anya's belief-system: 'All of life is war... Every day is a movement in the war... We are all ruled by death' (550-1). Above all, 'Suffering teaches you you can never forget; you can only repeat and repeat' (551). The circular construction of the narrative – from the present to the past to the present again – is iconic of the thinking of this woman forever trapped in atrocity.

Increasingly as Ninka reaches adolescence, 'so beautiful it tore the heart' (552), the images that haunt Anya are of the atrocities committed against women. Just as Anya was tutored by her mother's memories of the rape of women in Russia, Ninka is told the story of the beautiful and clever Vilno Jewess who married a gentile 'and then, when the Germans came, he threw her right out onto the street, and she was killed before everyone else' (552). The persecution of women escapes the confines of the Holocaust. Indeed, the traditional association of female beauty, sexuality and maiming/punishment which forms the dominant theme in this narrative is central to Western culture. Amid all the instabilities of Anya's thinking, this fear has a sound rationale. Fromberg Schaeffer, in her portrayal of Anya as a mother, demonstrates her awareness of what Alexander terms the 'relentless attack upon "the Jewish mother"', the 'well-known monster of American fiction, who suffocates her offspring with egotism parading as affection' (1979: 133). Anya, striving to protect her daughter from the dangers of misogyny, falls into this misogynistic stereotype; they appear inescapable. However, Fromberg Schaeffer's representation of Anya owes nothing to an ageing woman's jealousy of her daughter's beauty and youth and everything to her appraisal of Ninka's doubled jeopardy as woman and a Jewess, having experienced it literally upon her own body.



## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Langer (1998: 51-2) quotes from the testimony of Arina B., Tape T-2045 in the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale University.

## Chapter 6

### MALE- AND FEMALE-AUTHORED HOLOCAUST FICTIONS: A COMPARISON

#### 6.1 A genealogy of Holocaust fiction

The previous two chapters comprised detailed analyses of two seminal works by women, showing how their fictions developed the particular women's themes identified in chapter 3 of this thesis. This chapter briefly compares a variety of Holocaust fictions by male and female authors. It contrasts the pornographic representations of women in Ka-Tzetnik 135633's *House of Dolls* (1956) and William Styron's *Sophie's Choice* (1976). It examines stereotypes of women in two documentary fictions, John Hersey's *The Wall* (1950) and Jean-François Steiner's *Treblinka* (1966). Such misuses of women are interrogated in Norma Rosen's feminist fiction *Touching Evil* (1969). Finally this chapter will examine contemporary novels by two women writers, Cheryl Pearl Sucher (*The Rescue of Memory*, 1997) and Marisa Kantor Stark (*Bring Us the Old People*, 1998). It will aim to chart the evolutionary pattern of representations of women in the Holocaust, comparing the ways in which male and female authors utilise and refute traditional literary female stereotypes.

The development of our perception of the Holocaust, Michael Marrus believes, can be likened to the two-phase model of understanding conflict advanced by historian Sir Herbert Butterfield: 'The first, which he called "heroic," is formulated in the heat of battle; it has a primitive and simple shape, largely dwelling on moral issues associated with the cause of one or another of the belligerents'. The second is "'academic history'" which 'represents "a higher and riper stage of historiography"', a more distanced view, less melodramatic, more focused on war as tragedy<sup>1</sup>. Marrus recognises that in terms of the Holocaust this model has drawbacks; 'the terrain is so unfamiliar, the frame of reference so horrifying and bizarre, and the cultural landmarks so unintelligible that customary historical methods may simply fail' (1993: 129). Nevertheless, he argues, our view of the Holocaust has become 'more shaded, and our vision has acquired greater complexity' (6) over the last two decades. The increasing complexity of fictional representations of the Holocaust can be paralleled to this broadening of historical consciousness, with the exception of fictions of gender. Dale Spender, in her classic 1980 study *Man Made Language* argues that within discourse 'Masculinity is the unmarked form: the assumption is that the world is male until proved otherwise' (1998: 20). Women occupy a



'negative semantic space' (21); 'Words which are marked for female refer to specifically female activities which are evaluated from a male point of view' as being of 'lesser value' (20). She finds that within scholarship generally, 'ideas which presumably pertained to both sexes were actually based on the study of males and merely extended to females' (64). Inherent in this 'dominant/muted' model is the assumption that 'women and men will generate different meanings... that there is more than one perceptual order, but that only the "perceptions" of the dominant group, with their inherently partial nature, are encoded and transmitted' (77). The conclusions of researchers within the Holocaust, as this thesis has demonstrated, strikingly echo Spender's of almost two decades ago – the work first appeared in 1980. Sara Horowitz typically claims that Holocaust discourse sees 'the representation of women as anomalous (and man as normative)' (Baskin (ed.), 1994: 266). Lillian Kremer contends that 'most men writing about the concentrationary universe consign women to the margins of their imaginative Holocaust writing' (Kremer, 1999: 3-4). It can be suggested that within women's fictions such as Fromberg Shaeffer's, Karmel's, Rosen's, Sucher's and Stark's the dominant perceptions of male writers have been most strenuously interrogated. Male fictions, conversely, have tended to rely on what Hilary Lips terms gender '*schemas*... self-perpetuating channels or filters of information, guiding the individual to pay attention to information that fits the schema or stereotype and to ignore or explain away things that don't fit' (1997: 26). A particularly pernicious stereotype has been the near-pornographic portrayal of women which, arguably, owes much to eighteenth-century male-authored Gothic fiction. Klaus Theweleit's model of misogyny in proto-Nazi literature, developed throughout his two-volume study, suggests clear links with this genre. The critic Robert Franciosi argues of Styron's work in particular that in his 'crucial' description of Sophie Zawistowska in her agonising choiceless choice between the lives of her two children, Styron 'succumbs to the Gothic style that... denies traumatic history' (Clarke and Aycock (eds.), 1990: 202).

## 6.2 Ka-Tzetnik 135633: *House of Dolls* (1956)

In the supposedly autobiographical Auschwitz writings of Yehiel Feiner (Ka-Tzetnik 135633) – whom Hannah Arendt terms 'the author of several books on Auschwitz that dealt with brothels, homosexuals, and other "human interest stories"' (1994: 224) – Omer Bartov finds a 'bizarre and startling mixture of kitsch, sadism, and what initially appears as outright pornography'. Bartov, in his 1997 essay "Kitsch and Sadism in Ka-Tzetnik's Other Planet: Israeli Youth Imagine the Holocaust" describes the ambivalent relationship Israeli culture has had since the postwar years with this writer whose work 'is related to both and yet belongs to neither the "legitimate" nor the "illegitimate" literature of the Holocaust' (50). *House of Dolls*, the narrative of a young Jewish woman's sufferings in an Auschwitz brothel, cannot emanate from

Feiner's own experience in Auschwitz – a non-privileged Jewish *Musselmän* (52) would not have been allowed inside a brothel – nor from 'a diary kept by a young Jewess who was captured in Poland when she was fourteen... and subjected to enforced prostitution in a Nazi labour camp'<sup>2</sup>; Daniella Prelesnik killed herself in Auschwitz. Novels such as *House of Dolls*, Bartov admits, 'may well attract readers more interested in detailed descriptions of sadism and murder rather than understanding their causes and motivations' (65).

Why has Holocaust narrative almost from its inception served as 'a site for sexual titillation and pornographic representation, often clad in the respectable garment of historical novels or films' (65)? Bartov claims that between the late 1940s and the early 1960s young male Israelis gained their sex education – in a country not then renowned for its sexual permissiveness – from 'so-called "Stalags"', a 'type of pornographic literature' of the Holocaust 'replete with perverse sex and explicit violence'. For that generation, in rebellion against "'legitimate"' Holocaust literature of 'action, sacrifice and meaningful death' (49), nothing could violate 'a greater taboo' than 'deriving sexual pleasure from pornography in the context of the Holocaust' (49). Feiner's works, Bartov finds, 'share some characteristics with the "Stalag" pulp fiction, which also employed women's camps and prostitute inmates as the "historical" context for their plots' (51). Were his novels about any other subject they would have been relegated to 'a not particularly prominent place' in the library of the average adolescent (46). In fact, Feiner's narratives were circulated to Israeli high schools as 'recommended reading on the Holocaust' by the Israeli ministry of education under Zevulun Hammer (58-9). Yet it is not simply within Israeli culture that pornography and the Holocaust have been coupled. For Sybil Milton, the belief that 'Jewish women were forced to serve as prostitutes in the SS bordellos and were frequently raped' amounts to a 'popular postwar myth, sometimes exploited and sensationalized', which 'reflects a macabre postwar misuse of the Holocaust for popular titillation' rather than historical fact (Rittner and Roth (eds.), 1993: 230-1). While such 'sexual fantasies of postwar literature and television' are "'ridiculous misconceptions'"<sup>3</sup>, Joan Ringelheim nevertheless traces the widespread belief among children of survivors that their mothers had been raped to 'fantasies induced by the media's sexualisation of the Holocaust' (Ofer and Weitzman (eds.), 1998: 340). Bartov himself remains bafflingly blind to Feiner's misogyny. *House of Dolls* is not, after all, a novel 'describing the manner in which Nazis tortured Jews' (49); the primary purpose of its pornography is scarcely *racial* denigration. Such criticism appears to support Ringelheim's belief that women's experiences reflect the ubiquitous nature of sexist oppression. For this reason, arguably women's experiences in the Holocaust are as likely as any others to represent possibilities for pornographic exploitation.



### 6.3 William Styron: *Sophie's Choice* (1976)

Bartov suggests that the Holocaust as 'intellectually stimulating zone of crime and sexual perversion... subjugation and submission' achieves 'such intellectual (and not so intellectual) popularity precisely due to its "dangerous" subject'" (1996: 128). With the publication of *Sophie's Choice* almost twenty years after *House of Dolls*, 'the juxtaposition of sex and the Holocaust [was] dressed up as art, thus sanctioning its passage from the backroom to the shelves reserved for the literary' (Smith, 1990: 88). It achieved bestseller status, becoming a major film starring Meryl Streep and Kevin Klein. Its central character is not a passive sexual victim but a willing collaborator in her sexual misuse by a schizophrenic Jew who renders the Polish Auschwitz survivor Sophie Zawistowska the archetypal persecutor of *all* Jews, regardless of their gender. To this extent, it appears as if Sophie oppresses herself. In *House of Dolls*, Harry Prelesnik is sexually terrorised by an SS guard reminiscent of Irma Graese. In this novel, Sophie becomes a personification of Graese. Nathan Landau justifies his mental instabilities, as well as his sexualised violence towards Sophie, as stemming from his consciousness of what has happened to his race in the Holocaust. The narrator is himself deeply misogynistic; the women who refuse to service his sexual needs are objectified sexually, as 'a very sick virgin' (1983: 238) and 'something worse than a Cock Tease' (575). For Joan Smith, what constitutes 'the secret of [the novel's] popularity' (1990: 88) is that *Sophie's Choice* is the Holocaust 'relentlessly eroticized'; the female characters, and in particular Sophie 'exist as stimulants of lust' (87).

Alvin Rosenfeld's chief objection to the novel is its downplaying of the Holocaust as racial genocide, its 'tendency to universalize Auschwitz as a murderous thrust against "mankind"' (159). The novel becomes 'an extended parable of all men's travail' (163). He acknowledges that "'All men"... are represented chiefly by a woman' who is 'put through hell' (163), without remarking on the narrative's subtle *justifications* of misogyny, from the lesser – the narrator Stingo's representations of women as sexual tormentors – to the greater – Sophie's representation as a Nazi collaborator. It appears to escape Rosenfeld's notice that the narrative itself collaborates in the Nazis' sexism, representing Sophie as responsible for her own guilt in that on the Auschwitz ramp she chose to save her son, condemning her daughter to death. Rosenfeld catalogues the 'physical, sexual and psychological attacks' made on Sophie, 'victimized in turn by her domineering and racist father, Rudolph Höss, his lesbian house maid, a New York subway digital rapist, a strapped-out Polish assassin, her frigid husband, another lesbian comrade-in-arms [in fact Wanda neither attacks nor victimises Sophie], and mad Nathan' (163). 'On the slopes of her decline' into suicidal depression she can 'nevertheless ride to sexual ecstasy time and again with her crazy, hopped-up Jewish lover [and] parade the streets and beaches of New York with him dressed in expensive, custom-made period outfits' (163-4). This 'mighty erotic struggle' has, Rosenfeld rightly argues, nothing to do with Auschwitz (164). It has, however, a great deal to do with male fictions of Auschwitz where such sexual



stereotyping obscures real lives. Rosenfeld does not relate Sophie to the "Stalag" or the Gothic novel (see chapter 2, p. 32); Franciosi, who identifies Styron's work as 'yet another Southern Gothic novel' by its 'brooding prose' states that 'Until the selection scene I find the novel both accurate and sensitive' (Clarke and Aycock (eds.), 1990: 199), omitting to suggest its intertextual linkages with pornography. Such intertextualities may play a beneficial role; Judith Baumel suggests that 'the sexually explicit "*Stalag*" literature' might actually have created a 'tone and cultural framework' enabling women survivors writing in the 1940s and 50s to deal more openly about sexuality than in later testimonies of the 70s and 80s, whose comparative sexual modesty 'contrasts sharply' (1998: 46-7) with these earlier narratives. The "Stalags" achieved a relatively limited readership. Can one suggest that fictions such as Styron's which gained mass circulation have exerted pressures on women to censor their later testimony? If so, lacunae such as Franciosi's and Rosenfeld's become historically as well as critically significant.

Gender stereotyping, Lips argues, divides women into two variants, 'virtuous ones who are restrained and selective in their sexual behaviour' and 'the promiscuous, seductive ones who tempt men away from their more important pursuits and who fill the roles of prostitutes and performers in pornographic films' (1997: 186). In the Holocaust, young women such as Sophie and Daniella, transported to Auschwitz from sheltering patriarchal cultures which stress modesty and sexual innocence, become sexually promiscuous against their will. The Holocaust thus appears to offer possibilities for utilising both these stereotypes in turn. Styron, like Feiner, exploit the possibilities of making women assume the guilt for their sexual degradation. Daniella commits suicide. Sophie masochistically participates in almost 'everything it is possible to do' (Styron, 1983: 657) sexually with the novel's narrator, initiating and completing his carnal education in one night. Ridding Stingo of his distracting virginity, Sophie's sexual victimisation is justified in the name of creativity; she 'brings to sexual and artistic maturity a young aspiring Southern writer' (Rosenfeld, 1988: 164). *Then* she commits suicide, cancelling herself out as a possible source of further distraction.

Her role requires Sophie to be literary stereotype before she is Holocaust survivor. She is allowed only limited powers of deduction, which enables her innocently to collude with her father's rabid antisemitism, for which her subsequent suffering becomes a kind of expiation. Yet it is her physical appearance which locates her particularly within what Angela Carter terms the 'blonde, buxom and unfortunate sorority' of the 'the Good Bad Girl' (1990: 63): 'she is beautiful, she arouses concupiscence. Therefore she knows in her heart she must be bad. If she is bad, then it is right she should be punished. She is always ready for more suffering' (70). This represents a strikingly apt portrait of Sophie; Carter actually derives it from her analysis of De Sade's pornographic victim Justine. Such a woman exists primarily to be sexual:

As [Sophie] went slowly up the stairs I took a good look at her body in its clinging silk summer dress. While it was a beautiful body, with all the right prominences, curves, continuities and symmetries, there was something a little strange about it – nothing visibly missing and not so much deficient as reassembled. And that was precisely it, I could see.



The odd quality proclaimed itself through the skin. It possessed the sickish plasticity... of one who has suffered severe emaciation and whose flesh is even now in the last stages of being restored. Also, I felt that underneath that healthy suntan there lingered the sallowness of a body not wholly rescued from a terrible crisis. But none of these at all diminished a kind of wonderfully negligent sexuality having to do at that moment, at least, with the casual but forthright way her pelvis moved and with it her truly sumptuous rear end. Despite past famine, her behind was as perfectly formed as some fantastic prize-winning pear (74).

Carter argues that 'The blonde's physical fragility is... only apparent. She must have a robust constitution to survive the blows life deals her. Her fragility is almost the conscious disguise of masochism and masochism necessitates an infinite resilience' (65). Famine perversely appears to have *ripened* Sophie's sexuality. Deceptions constitute her whole identity. She – like her history – is a constant reassemblage; even her perfect teeth turn out to be false. For Carter, the blonde has 'fostered her own innocence, her own stupidity, as an insulation from the pain of her endless humiliations... exiled from her own allure, she does not know how much her allure deviates from the norm' (69-70). Sophie's sexual excesses are remote from Holocaust trauma simply because her sexuality is so excessive, as are all her appetites. That this representation of her is formulated by a narrator at times as unbalanced as the psychotic Nathan is overlooked because first and foremost we recognise the stereotype and anticipate the use to which it will be put. Thus the significance of Nathan's taunts of "'Suck me, you Fascist pig, Irma Greise Jew-burning cunt!'" (452) is effaced by the standardised pornography of the sex which follows:

even now with the clouds of fear around her, while he taunts and abuses her – even now her pleasure is not mere mild enjoyment but the perennially re-created bliss, and chill waves shiver down her back as she sucks and sucks and sucks. She is not even surprised that the more he torments her scalp, the more he goads her with that detested "Irma," the more gluttonous becomes her lust to swallow up his prick, and when she ceases, just for an instant, and panting raises her head and gasps "Oh God, I love sucking you," the words are uttered with the same uncomplicated and spontaneous ardor as before (452).

Passages such as this, Smith suggests (1990: 92-3), 'call to mind the heroine of the French pornographic novel, *The Story of O*'<sup>4</sup>.

What sexual drive can emerge from Sophie's body of deceptions? One that constantly perverts the novel's apparently serious analysis of atrocity: did/does the American South now outdo Hitler's regime in racial brutality? Can a generation not involved in atrocity be held collectively responsible? 'Stop this talk right now,' [Sophie] demanded. "Stop it! It is too serious for Sunday." There was playfulness in her manner but I could tell she meant business. "Forget Bobby Weed [a Negro, recently brutally lynched]. We must talk about happy things. We must go to Coney Island and swim and eat and have a lovely time!" (102). Sirenlike, it is Sophie who constantly tempts the novel's males into a discourse of sexuality.



#### 6.4 Holocaust story: Jean-François Steiner's *Treblinka* (1966) and John Hersey's *The Wall* (1950).

These works, taken together, provide a focus for analysis of novels in which women are marginalised as part of fictional strategies to redeem the Jew as military hero. Produced sixteen years apart, these documentary fictions are often paired critically as *versions* of history where, as Ezrahi argues, 'the clarity demanded by a story tailored to mass consumption tends to generate simplistic ideological categories' to which historical complexity is accommodated (1982: 33). Male characters shift from relative passivity dictated by incarceration, and rationalised by religious and philosophical arguments drawn directly from Jewish tradition, to armed rebellion. The Jewish male abandons his particular cultural perception of persecution to gain a place as hero within a literary tradition alien to his own. Simone De Beauvoir, in her Preface to *Treblinka*, sees in Steiner's narrative of the Treblinka uprising a riposte to the charges of Jewish passivity made by writers such as Hannah Arendt around the time of the Eichmann trial in 1961 (1994: xix); it met the cultural needs of 'the young *sabras* of Israel' whose 'whole education' in the mid-Sixties tended 'to inculcate [heroism] in them from infancy, in the form of military courage' (xxii). The way in which women are pared to fit into such projects is rarely examined. Critics have concentrated largely upon reader reception: 'The raging controversies that these and other documentary novels... touched off was generated by the recognition that, for the present at least, these works were being read as historical documents' (Ezrahi, 1982: 35).

In reality, the Treblinka extermination camp held only a handful of permanent women prisoners whose sexual exploitation is seen by survivor Richard Glazar for what it was. With relation to the Warsaw ghetto, Hersey's locus, Dan Kurzman finds that the women members and officials of the ZOB<sup>5</sup>, while often the wives, lovers or relatives of male resistance workers, abandoned traditional gender roles to take equal part in the events leading up to the ghetto uprising and in the action itself<sup>6</sup>. In Steiner's fiction, the women introduced into Treblinka by the Nazis as a final stage in their project to dehumanise the male prisoners bear distinct affinities to Lips' sexually distracting stereotype. If as researchers believe, incarceration feminised men to some extent (see chapter 1, p. 12), the Treblinka men confront and reject these mirror images of what they have become; the women constitute the catalyst in their transformation from passivity to masculine rebellion. Hersey's Rachel Apt represents an amalgam of what Baumel identifies as 'the collective public image of Holocaust heroines', encompassing 'resistance fighters to self-sacrificing mothers, underground couriers to religious martyrs' (1998: 47). This mediation of the Holocaust through such gender schemas may be one of the ways in which its intractability can be overcome for a mass readership; they decode the unknowable via that which has long been familiar. Yet many critics believe that such utilisations of pre-existent narrative formulae are especially problematic when the Holocaust is the subject (see chapter 2). Terrence Des Pres, in his Introduction to *Treblinka*, acknowledges that the Holocaust 'cannot be



framed in terms of the old heroic ethic wherein the individual, as an individual, defies power and willingly dies for a glorious cause' (xviii). Yet Des Pres justifies Steiner's narrative because 'So far as I know, except for *Treblinka* there exists no *story*, presented from the *inside*, of the origin, the business-as-usual, and the final demise of a major death camp':

By "story" I mean exactly what Aristotle meant: a human action through which the agents themselves are defined, an action with a beginning, a middle, and an end, with all its parts – in this case *all those free-floating images* which haunt us – *subordinated to a wholeness which gives the details at least some degree of perspective and meaning* (xiii, emphasis added).

Yehuda Bauer's definition of historical crafting embodies the contradiction which might be said to lie at its heart: 'history is not a science, but the art of telling the story of the past according to certain sets of agreed rules', wherein writers' biases have to be reconciled with 'the overarching demand for objective writing' (Berenbaum and Peck (eds.), 1998: 20). It can be argued that objectivity is itself an ideology (see chapter 2, p. 33); yet here, Des Pres is not simply advocating a "thick description"<sup>7</sup> of Treblinka to '[expand] the understanding of a strange and alien world' (Sofsky, 1997: 14). He is advocating Steiner's *version* precisely because it *does* reframe the uprising at Treblinka within the ideological demands of the Western literary tradition.

This, for Ezrahi, is essentially masculine. Within the Jewish literary tradition, a fact 'frequently overlooked by historians as well as by popular novelists and the general public' is that 'for nearly two thousand years it was not the Maccabean warriors, Matthias and his sons, but the Maccabean martyrs, Hanna and her seven sons, who were exalted in Jewish as well as Christian literature'<sup>8</sup>. Both Steiner's and Hersey's narratives exemplify this process of rewriting Jewish cultural history, where male characters preface their narrative transformation into military heroes with informed and articulate advocacy of their cultural tradition of martyrdom (Steiner, 1994: 46-8), as if to suggest they know what they are doing.

Historian Konnilyn Feig's extensive reliance on Steiner in her analysis of Treblinka supports Ezrahi's claim that such fictions have achieved prominence over ghetto diaries and historical studies (1982: 35). Feig draws heavily on Steiner's representation of Treblinka as a smooth-running "intentionalist"<sup>9</sup> operation by 'The Technicians of the Final Solution' (1994: 19) who appear to think with a single, Machiavellian mind (Steiner, 1994, 38-42), despite her acknowledgement that 'his attitudes towards Jewish behavior are so erroneous that I do not even refer to them' (Feig, 1983: 486n). Historian Gitta Sereny finds it 'extraordinary that novelists find it necessary to invent such tales' as Steiner does, 'when the appalling truth is surely far more "dramatic"' (1974: 259). Herein lies the reason for choosing to examine Steiner's and Hersey's novels: their influence has at times been so authoritative as to slant historical judgement, perhaps *because* their narratives are uncomplicated by intransigent imagery which cannot be incorporated into the genre of the historical novel. Glazar, interestingly, uses such popular cultural renditions of heroism precisely in order to *demythologise* the Treblinka revolt, telling fellow survivor Karl Unger: "'From what I have seen of these things in the movies, I don't



think our little uprising was all that exemplary. Sure, we threw a few hand grenades into the air and set everything on fire. But after that we just fumbled around and let ourselves be shot at like fish in a barrel'" (1999: 148).

#### 6.4.1 Women in *Treblinka*

When Steiner does acknowledge the position of Jews under the Nazis, it is by representing them as *feminine*: 'What could you do with your bare hands, what could women and old men do against these strong young soldiers, well trained and well armed?' (1994: 183). His answer is to employ feminine helplessness as a spur: in order not to be like women, Jewish men must become soldiers.

Glazar sketches the pitifully brief history of the Treblinka women. They served as laundresses and domestics; as part of a bizarre ritual of Sunday entertainments which the prisoners were forced to stage for the SS, "marriages" were arranged by the Nazis between senior Jewish inmates and these women (1999: 124), a form of enforced prostitution.

In Steiner's fiction the women's arrival constitutes the culmination of the Nazi project to render the men morally supine, to rob them of 'their last particle of humanity' (295). 'With its... new buildings and its Sunday celebrations, Treblinka now needed only one thing to play the farce: women. The first convoy corrected this situation'. The women 'transformed' the camp. The twenty 'young, fresh and pretty' girls reprieved from the gas chamber wreak havoc: 'Fights broke out around these frightened and helpless women, who did not yet understand what had happened to them. Everything that Treblinka boasted in the way of *kapos* and privileged persons began to dress with meticulous care, to bathe and to show off' (360). The women tease the men, 'strolling half-naked in the yard'; 'In the laundry where they worked they took off all their clothes. The spectacle drove the prisoners crazy' (387). In the extermination and corpse-processing camp 'the afternoons... were simply an uninterrupted succession of parties' where 'Singing, dancing and games succeeded each other until evening. The women, affected by the madness around them, threw themselves into this frantic life, and soon their quarters lacked only a red light over the door' (375). One young couple 'lived the story of Romeo and Juliet'. When Yajik first beholds the unnamed seventeen year-old 'with two long black braids and the face of a flower' he 'forgot Treblinka. She was so lovely, so sweet, so pure, so frail; she was like a miracle, like a dream in this world of madness, death and hate' (365). Transformed by love, a particularly 'sadistic' kapo becomes 'a bashful schoolboy' (367). To win Malka, he becomes a resistance fighter; to be with her, he is equally prepared to betray the revolt to the Germans. When she is sent to the sealed-off Camp Two Shlomo sacrifices his privileged role as kapo to carry corpses with her. 'Blinded by love, he no longer cared about anything but Malka and he



was determined to do anything to see her again'. 'What did he care about the revolt, what did he care about vengeance, what did he care about freedom? All he wanted was to see Malka' (370).

Glazar, interviewed by Sereny, states that "'of course most of the – few – girls who were there paired off with somebody. Love? It's hard to say; relationships, strong friendships, yes – and yes, perhaps love'". He remembers that a kapo asked to accompany his lover to the death camps: "They didn't let him. But what would you call that? Not love?" Another couple planned to escape together; the man was shot. "Perhaps Tchechia slept with other men afterwards. But can you wonder? *Did it really matter?*" (Sereny, 1974: 194-5, emphasis added). In the Western literary tradition, of course, it does. Steiner's women speak and perform only in conformity with stereotype. They are muted – Yajik's girl is 'helpless, distracted with grief' (365) – or they employ their bodies to speak for them. The newly arrived Malka, 'In a last gesture of pride and defiance towards her killers and towards death... did not try to hide her nakedness. Arrogant and scornful, she let them admire her and wished to die' (366-7). Yet 'overcome by Shlomo's love, she began to love him too' (368). Women are untrustworthy. Malka, after being 'made to swear not to say anything' about the revolt 'One night... no longer had the courage to keep the secret... to herself' (368) and tells Shlomo. Another woman, Perele 'who was jealous of Malka, informed against her to Kiwe one day when Malka was drunk' (369). If the revolt is endangered through these women's loose tongues, it is saved because Shlomo out of love will not betray Malka's secret: 'Ten times he was ready to go and give information about the revolt, but ten times he saw Malka's face with that intense, imperious and pleading look. He could not disobey that look' (370).

Galewski, the uprising's leader, bemoans to his colleague the moral capitulation this preoccupation with women represents. In acquiescing to these enforced "marriages" the men are attempting to portray themselves to the Germans as content now to remain in captivity. But somehow the women have outmanoeuvred the men:

"I know [Galewski] began, "the Germans are trying to deceive us and we are trying to deceive the Germans. But this does not explain why Ribak loves this woman, why she loves him, and why I enjoyed going and having a drink down there...

Have we really become slaves? Have we really ceased to be men?" (364).

Wondering "'Is it a sin to marry under such circumstances? Or is it an act of faith in life?'" , his friend Kurland concludes that "'life is like a woman: perhaps you should not love it too much if you are afraid to suffer'" (365). When the women are served up both to the inmates and the reader as light relief, atrocity is for a time at least, domesticated. The slackening of tension they cause is both narrative and moral. To the extent that they are represented as Nazi bait they conform to stereotype, distracting men from their "real" purpose of learning to be heroes. Glazar's authentic voice – in Treblinka, of all places, did love really matter? – is lost.



#### 6.4.2 Women behind *The Wall*: John Hersey's resistance heroines

Emmanuel Ringelblum in his Warsaw ghetto diary states that 'The story of the Jewish woman will be a glorious page in the history of Jewry during the present war' (1981: 274): women who 'without a murmur, without a second's hesitation... accept and carry out the most dangerous missions' and who volunteer as couriers and smugglers or to rescue other Jews in prison 'as though it were the most natural thing in the world' despite putting themselves 'in mortal danger every day' (273). Kurzman and others record a high level of political commitment among Jewish women; several occupied senior positions in the hierarchy of the ZOB who orchestrated the uprising. Brana Gurewitsch finds that women, particularly if they possessed 'the "Aryan" features of blonde hair and blue eyes' had several advantages over male resistance workers: they were not identifiable as Jews by physiology, clothing or hair and they were often more familiar, through their socialising with neighbours, with their country's language and culture, including Christian ritual (1998: 222). They exploited the ideological climate in which 'The persistence of the stereotype of the passive, homebound woman dominated by her husband prevented Germans from immediately suspecting women of activities that did not fit the stereotype' (221). Women took 'a conscious decision to do something right in the face of wrong, to behave consistently with the moral code in which they believed, regardless of personal danger or the threat of death' (222).

In Hersey's fiction, Rachel Apt's politicisation begins in a revolt against 'the handicap of her face' (51). Possessed of 'the face of a parrot, with eyes close together, a large chopper of a nose, and lips and chin running hastily back as if in fear of that nose', her body is only a partial redemption, though it is 'as beautiful as her face is not. Her bosom is ample but not so ample as to need mechanical assistance in maintaining a proper pride; her waist is like her chin, almost nowhere to be found; her hips curve out but know moderation and retire just in time; and her legs... are splendid' (44).

Women are refracted through the overtly misogynistic gaze of a narrator whose word, we are assured, is nevertheless utterly trustworthy. 'Levinson was too scrupulous to imagine *anything*' (1988: 6). Imagination, however, differs from cultural bias, a phenomenon which diarist Chaim Kaplan identifies as a crucial factor in diary production: 'Impressions generally are not objective truths, but rather subjective. They are dependent on the personality of the observer. But even subjective truth testifies to the state of affairs and in [*sic*] observer from a distance as a rule has an open, uncorrupted eye which sees a composite truth, partly subjective and partly objective' (1999: 123). Kaplan also acknowledges the diarist's restricted narrative viewpoint: 'my abilities are limited; I don't know all the facts; those that I do know may not be sufficiently clear; and many of them I write on the basis of rumors whose accuracy I cannot guarantee'. He conveys not facts primarily, but how events manifest themselves in mood, in the morale of the ghetto



inmates (1999: 189). Hersey's stress on Levinson's truthfulness is simple rhetoric by which the reader is persuaded to accept a limited-viewpoint narrator as omniscient. Levinson is an obsessive, collating, comparing and recording – however improbably – every scrap of remembered dialogue. For Rosenfeld this strategy constitutes an admission that that 'the literary imagination cannot gain a sufficient authority on its own terms but must yield to the terms of legitimacy that belong to documentary evidence' (1988: 66). Both he and Hersey appear to miss Kaplan's point. As Suzanne Bunkers and Cynthia Huff argue, the diary's primary value lies in '[disclosing] how we construct knowledge' (1996: 2). It constitutes 'a repository of information about social structures and relationships' which also suggests how the self is constructed (1).

What can be gleaned about the social relationships within Levinson's Warsaw? How is *his* self constructed? Largely, one might suggest, via his bitter awareness of his lack of appeal to women. He is a diarist because he is an outsider; like Rachel Apt, he possesses little or no possibility for fulfilment within the conventional gender roles of marriage. His interest in Rachel is thus engaged by their similarity. Rachel is disbarred from motherhood which is represented as the summit of feminine achievement. She is given 'all the duties, but none of the prerogatives or authority, of motherhood' (51). Rachel occupies the position of foil to the conventional feminine stereotype, represented by her 'very, very pretty' sister Halinka (43). These two women's bodies, typically fragmented by the de-scribing male gaze, perfectly represent women's self-division. Both are mismatches. Halinka is 'more beautiful by a deal. Her face is broader; its cheekbones push out to break its oval pleasingly, her eyes are widely spaced and helpless, her nose is neat, sharp, tiny, and tightplaned, and her lips so innocent-looking that one imagines they must have curled in horror at the words which rushed past them during the argument... The grace of Halinka is all spent on her summit. Her body is angular, straight, and barely adequate as a pillar for that elegant head' (44). The subject of their quarrel? Rachel wants to hang a mirror in a dark corner where it cannot reflect her face, Halinka wants it in the light.

Anatomy to Levinson constitutes women's destiny. Halinka is a brainless little flirt: 'Bibble-bibble-bibble: she talks as I imagine a little white rabbit would talk. But Rachel, now, she comes out slowly with what she thinks and feels' (43). Rachel, 'amazingly well balanced for one in such a difficult position', is 'strangely mature, she is overripe for learning' (51). Men's characters are formed via their interactions with their culture. Rachel states: 'I believe that it was because of my face that I learned a long time ago to adjust myself to disappointments and to be rather easy about difficulties' (627, emphasis added).

Ghettoisation actually signifies Rachel's rescue from 'a kind of isolation... behind the wall of her looks' (50). Brought 'out into the open' by the necessity of running an illegal ghetto school, Rachel can now engage upon the traditional spinster's sublimation:



She wrestled with the problem of the illicit school as if it were a risky love affair. Her first. She trusted – with those from whom she wanted things. She sought advice like a lovelorn girl. She... lay awake at nights, her heart pounding at the thought of what she was doing. Her appetite was enormously variable. She wept without knowing why... She... felt everything far more deeply than she ever had before (92).

Contrary to the historical reality where mothers were awarded death by gassing, Hersey's Holocaust confers on Rachel motherhood without the agonies of ghetto childbirth. She becomes the "Little Mother" (378) to her ghetto "family", the more selflessly and avidly maternal through a consciousness that 'because of her ugly face she herself would never know [the] excruciating transports' (497) of physical motherhood:

In any dangerous juncture, she had been the one to whom everyone looked to see what state of mind was appropriate. She had set the pitch of the entire group's feelings. If there was danger of panic, she drove sense and steadiness into her companions. If they became apathetic and morose, she lifted them to a proper level of apprehension. If a single man or woman began to feel self-pitiful, she was ready with comfort. The force of her sympathy was enormous: she could do more with a look than anyone else with a lecture. She had been singlehandedly cohesive (377).

As resistance heroine Rachel achieves a mythic status, androgynous, angelic, with echoes of Kurzman's description of the real resistance leader Mordechai Anielewicz, nicknamed "Angel" because he 'embodied... the tortured yet ultimately triumphant Jewish spirit... that had kept his people alive through two thousand years of darkness and dispersion. He was as gentle as a wailed psalm yet as hard as the rock of Zion' (1993: 31-2). Her reward? In a strangely reversed order of female maturation, she is finally allowed sexual initiation and fulfilment. Her role having made her 'as pretty as she could ever be' (409) and Dolek Berson's 'frail... delicate... often sick and usually helpless' (38) wife having been conveniently deported, they become lovers. Bound by the limits of the novel's structure, one of the lovers must authorise a version of their lovemaking for Levinson's diary. As might be expected, it is not Rachel, but Berson: "It was as if a bud had been imprisoned in scales too long and now came into full flower all at once, almost exploding into a wonder of fragrance and color. I could not suppress her, Noach, and she could not imagine me. We were wild enough for a lifetime" (560). Women can only bloom fully when de-flowered, even in this extreme, with the ghetto dying around them; her blossoming among the rubble supports Bartov's contention that what is required of Holocaust story is that it is primarily a story of human interest 'retold according to accepted conventions of representation' (1996: 168). Gender stereotype, arguably, constitutes a primary convention.

#### 6.5 Norma Rosen: *Touching Evil* (1969)

Norma Rosen's *Touching Evil* expresses her thesis that awareness of the Holocaust, via media representations such as the 1961 Eichmann trial, 'can be so intense that it radiates out to affect non-Jews who then experience it through the imagination' (1992: 51). This concept of



bearing 'Witness-through-the-imagination' (10) constitutes 'not a generalizing, a spreading and thinning-out of the Jewish trauma' but 'the opposite: a bringing of the non-Jew into the Jewish experience. It is not universalizing: it is Judaizing' (51). Primarily, however, the novel suggests that the burden of empathic witnessing falls to women. Rosen is fully aware that 'Novelists... are notorious connectors. They make meaning by linking one thing unexpectedly to another. Connecting means broadening and that, in the case of Holocaust suffering, comes dangerously close to universalizing away the particularity of experience' (50). Edward Alexander has accused Rosen of such universalising, of '[allowing] herself to be diverted' by 'feminist topicality' from her focus on the identification of her central characters with Holocaust suffering and instead '[presenting] women as the oppressed race' (1979: 132). Arguably the reverse is the case; *Touching Evil* particularises, showing the Holocaust infecting the individual lives of those sensitive to its continued implications. Hattie, heavily pregnant, watching the televised Eichmann trial, states that

If I found myself sending money and joining committees I would know what I am. A sympathiser. But I do nothing. I am paralyzed, in terror. I am an empathiser, then, a mystical participator, the kind who claws her skin and screams "Stop them!" to the grinning men round a street fight.

Paulo and Francesca read about love, and loved. Do I really believe it's possible to read about terror and be terrorized? (1990: 96-7).

This passage suggests not mystical participation but women's inability effectively to participate in halting the 'grinning men' who Hattie and Jean view in the Eichmann footage. This forms the core of their terror. Each has her symbol of this *gendered* helplessness. For Hattie it is a witness at the trial who 'gave birth in lice-infested straw, watched by a booted guard who held a torch "to see how life begins," and who then flung the newborn to the crematorium fires' (1992: 51-2). Jean, whose sexual initiation was orchestrated by her lover's showing her photographs of the liberated camps, retains from that encounter the image of '[a] woman naked, at the bottom of a pit, covered with blood, clawing her way upward through corpses' (1990: 55). The novel's central theme is that 'Women's bodies can absorb anything' (54). As well as soaking up the historical horrors, these two women absorb the everyday praxis of misogyny: Jean is raped, Hattie's experience in maternity hospital shows her in what contempt women are still held, even – or especially – in the process of becoming mothers. By showing contemporary women's lives deformed by media images of atrocity, Rosen challenges the established cultural connection between atrocity and titillation, aware that the Holocaust has been 'widely misused' in fiction, 'from casual reference on the one hand to S&M pornography on the other' (1992: 49). The explicit connection made between atrocity and sexual exploitation, established when Jean is literally penetrated by her lover's guilt-ridden sexual arousal at images of atrocity, is consistently maintained. Jean's isolation stems from her vow to remain unmarried and childless after this initiation; her sexual exploitation and rape result from this. The women could avoid such empathic witnessing only by denying the importance of the Holocaust itself – a form of escapism left, in the novel, to the male characters who, as Kremer claims, represent 'the larger



world's apathy' (1999: 216). Men articulate the various shadings of Holocaust denial. For Hattie's brother-in-law Stanwood, inhumanity is the human condition; to be 'melted down by pity for people they never met' is 'A bad mutation of human feeling' (1990: 158). The normalisation of atrocity via psychological narrative – where Rosen might seem almost to be challenging survivor-psychiatrists such as Bruno Bettelheim – is sharply parodied by Jean, who mercilessly records in her diary the secondhand truisms of her psychiatrist lover Loftus:

Loftus says that Freud says the pleasure principle is in conflict with the world.

Loftus says that Adler says what we remember determines the soul's development. Or is it that turned around? And is it just the same reversed?

Loftus says that Jung says touching evil brings the danger of – I forget the word – is it succumbing to evil? Therefore don't succumb to anything. Don't even succumb to good (56).

Jean writes to Loftus: 'I've been writing down your wisdoms. The name of what I write down is called *Loftus says*. If Loftus says hands on hips then I do it. If Loftus doesn't say it then I don't do it... If just Jung said it, and you didn't say he said it, then it wouldn't exist for me' (57).

Male authority, Dale Spender believes, is rarely interrogated as to its partiality; 'male reality has usually been posited as the only reality'; women are 'required to "know" it, to operate within it and defer to its definitions' (1998: 90). Jean's voluntary isolation has earned her relative detachment from this climate, the right to 'declare my position outside the mind-deceiving, locked pattern' (266) of her culture; she is a freelance designer, illuminating others' manuscripts. Glossing her own seduction with the lexis of a child's reading primer or comic book, Jean shows how those cultural narratives which appear to accept responsibility for atrocity are particularly facile denials of it. Jean's tutor/lover, Oates, is a psychology professor: 'See the dear professor. How tall and skinny and anxious he is. See how he pops up when Jeannie comes in' (71).

An army psychologist friend has shown him photographs taken by the military and has described other captured pictures. Experimental cell blocks, drains in the tiled floors, all that. It hardly matters that these are Germans, Professor Oates says. What matters is that men have done it. Men like himself – teachers, students, lovers of science. They have replaced the mice in the maze with men.

"So that all men shall stand amazed," John Oates says softly. He looks young and ill and frightened (72).

His punning of maze-amaze calls the sincerity of his fear into question. He shows her

a photograph of a scene that is designed to become one of the classics of the world (see the dear professor about to seduce the virgin)... the piled-up stick bodies at the bottom of a lime pit.

(Do not try to pop up the bodies in the lime pit.)

Jeannie's soul is fainting. (Don't be afraid of such language, go on and use it, especially in a pop up.) She is about to enter one of those long larval sleeps that mark the end of a lived-out phase.

(Make the girl's pop up go down again, while she says, "I can't bear it.")

The couple have sex 'beneath the mice maze' on the lab floor:



"My harvest fruit," John Oates murmurs. "Without a blemish on your apple body. Only joy can cancel out that horror."

(See the dear couple. Take the tab and waggle them back and forth.)

Professor Oates, the behaviorist, feels remorse. "I seduced you with dirty pictures" (73).

Joy cancels out Oates' horror. Jean's innocence – sexual and cultural – is lived-out, finished. Her knowledge of atrocity – and the sexual use to which it can be put – is lived out.

For both women, the Eichmann trial constitutes an epiphany. The futility of Jean's vow is brought home to her: she is becoming 'an old priest... past the age of sacrifice, of choosing not to have children. When I was past childbearing, what then? Would I still believe that the terribleness of the times had led me to renounce children?' (78). Hattie is alienated from her family's complacency. The trauma of her labour is increased by her empathy for the labouring Holocaust victim. As Kremer argues, the women in her hospital ward figure as the novel's 'objective correlative, as Hattie's postwar referent for the despised helplessness and vulnerability of the camp inmate' (1999: 219). The novel contains many such parallels between the sexism of the Nazi era and contemporary women's status. Women's function as cleansing/absorbent bodies is a sustained theme of the novel. Hattie tells her husband: "It would be something for a woman to try out, for once, that peculiar masculine despair that's so aggressive. Fuck everybody! The world is shit! Wonderful, soothing words. Like a lullaby. Get drunk for a whole night and in the morning come home and vomit on the rug. Somebody will clean it up, and it's a cinch that body will be female" (198).

This feminine quality of absorbency is in no way redemptive. It is simply an ongoing process. They must choose, Rosen implies, whether to name atrocity for what it is, or enter into some sort of accommodation with the knowledge, in order to be accepted within their culture. Jean, rationally contemplating suicide at the novel's end, appears to refuse such accommodation. Hattie is more vulnerable, with a far greater emotional investment in being culturally acceptable. Prior to her labour Hattie has a vision of herself and Jean reabsorbing into their bodies all the mothers and children killed in the Holocaust: "We drew them into our wombs and kept them safe till danger was past... Then easily, gently, we passed them out again in a warm coating of blood" (225). Already this vision has overtones of kitsch. Weakened after her labour – where she experiences the callousness and contempt with which women are treated – Hattie's acceptance of the truisms ventriloquised by her male gynaecologist, that women's agonies are unimportant beside the joy of motherhood, signals her capitulation. Hattie's vision now becomes pure Hollywood spectacular:

"I have my play!" [Hattie] whispers, and beckons me closer, her green forehead shining up at me from her pillow. "Listen, Jean! It's to be set in a hospital room – like this – with four mothers. The spirits of the children fly above them in the air – like angels, you know?"

She stops to consider. "They'll have to be suspended on wires or some kind of pulley thing," she adds practically.

"The mothers talk about their love for their children [...] and then the children talk about their happiness to be alive at first, then each tells how he or she died. After each war, each atrocity, each death, the children fly down to their mothers' beds and disappear in them. Then the whole thing is repeated, and the children fly up again. New children... new births... new times... new joys... Centuries and centuries and centuries of joyful births and terrible deaths... After a while we begin to see similarities... we see the same children over and over... those children haven't been lost...!" (237).

The sheer banality of this endless cycle of atrocity and cleansing is now lost on Hattie, who originally worried that her vision might seem like 'a vacuum cleaner' (226) tidying the piles of corpses displayed on the television; an overcompensatory myth about the power of women's bodies to re-generate humanity after each atrocity. Now the scene has to Jean become grandiose in its redemptive mythologising, 'Hattie's Great Suctioning Ingatherer' (237), her 'vaginal shell game with the *Einsatzgruppen* – six million cats in a hat' (238). Jean sees that Hattie 'has allowed herself to be diverted' (255) from her individual 'mind-set' by the cultural formula which exhorts the contemporary witness to re-view the Holocaust simply as media imagery, with no emotional or sensory engagement:

Relax, look at it, don't stare, hypnotized, but obliquely, corner of the eye, don't look at all, sniff it, don't even sniff it, let it suggest to you... is it perhaps... can it be... is it possible...?

This is the way to survive (256).

#### 6.6 Women's contemporary Holocaust fiction: Cheryl Pearl Sucher, *The Rescue of Memory* (1997) and Marisa Kantor Stark, *Bring Us the Old People* (1998)

These two novels continue Rosen's focus on gender as a determining factor both in Holocaust experience and its narration. Like the testimonies examined in chapter 3 of this thesis, they represent a layering of personal testimony with an accumulation of cultural knowledge about the Holocaust. These novels thus express contemporary perceptions of the Holocaust and its survivors, in particular the cultural ambivalence about Holocaust commemoration which David Cesarani identifies as an aspect of 'the backlash against the so-called Holocaust industry' currently gaining ground among the media and in academic circles<sup>10</sup>. As with *Touching Evil*, both these novels reflect the specifically feminine consciousness of their narrators. Sucher's young narrator's relative cultural freedom – and in particular her influential position as public speaker – allows her fully to articulate the gendered clash between survivors' representations of incarceration and its aftermath, those of her father and the women of her family. Conversely, Stark's narrator's internalisation of her cultural devaluation as elderly and female is shown to silence testimony; in this case, the particular ordeal of a woman made the scapegoat for the death of her family.



### 6.6.1 Cheryl Pearl Sucher: rescuing whose memory?

Rachel Wallfisch's role as film-maker enables her to re-present Holocaust testimony: in this novel, a woman mediates male memories to the reader, at the same time contrasting them with those of female survivors. Her father's memories have scripted her childhood: listening has been her 'birthright, the reason I had been brought into this horrible world' (17). Now as an adult she de-scribes them: her father is transformed into Drummond, the captain of a 'rusting' spaceship 'in search of a fertile constellation, leaving behind an earth ravaged by nuclear holocaust' (1997: 35). Rachel's film is in some ways celebratory of her father's mythic, heroic status in his stories of survival and success in postwar America; in others, it is parodic of 'the Lodz ghetto's caped crusaders, men who lived on beet rations and revenge alone, performing unanaesthetized operations on their own limbs as they chanted fight songs and defuzed electric fences before stealing soup spoons from the commandant's larder to dig underground tunnels through the latrines to freedom' (34). Her hero's avowed objective, 'to survive so as to never need anybody or anything again' (35) has backfired; Drummond/Raphael Wallfisch is totally isolated. 'Alone in his peace, Drummond remained haunted by his inability to rescue what he had been forced to leave behind. Though triumphant, he never discovered peace or solace in even his acts of greatness' (35). Rachel's film grew from a fantasy created in childhood as a means of warding off the nightmares which result from hearing 'the thousand and one nights' (34) of Raphael's life; it honours his myths while laying bare their construction out of unbearable reality. Raphael 'loved argument more than he loved truth' (14); his stories are linear, leading away from the Holocaust to a rich future in America, abounding with self-consciously literary phrases at variance with his everyday dialogue. Rachel's reproduction of these lexical dissonances illustrates Raphael's process of simultaneous remembering and mythologising, a continual overcompensation. Raphael tells Rachel: 'If I had known what my life would be like in America, I would have died in concentration camp' (28). Raphael's family exist in a private ghetto walled by Holocaust memory, isolated from the American Jews who never experienced atrocity. The Holocaust constitutes the family's pool of signifiers; they point to referents unfamiliar to Rachel's peers, locating Rachel in a liminal position between the past and the present. The Holocaust remains an active force in their lives, responsible for illnesses and limitations. Rachel's mother Luba tells her: 'What was on our plate was too big for our eyes. We couldn't believe that we had survived the camps only to suffer more. Nothing had prepared us for such affliction' (282). The American Dream of abundance is deconstructed by the survivor as the overlaid plate; Luba explodes Raphael's creed that material success could fill the void left by their multiple losses, while she comprehends it: "he was forced to let go of everything and everyone he had ever loved: his parents, his sister, his cousins, his aunts, then me. When you understand this, you will understand how he can never let go of anything or anyone willingly again". Luba articulates for Rachel a central, gendered difference in their survival strategies: "I can bend but he cannot. Never expect him to bend, for it will break him" (283).



The opposed, female form of memorialising is represented by Luba's sister Tsenyeh. She tells Rachel that 'without recovering the past there can be no future, because there can be no healing'. Her memories are free of mythologising and the denial of emotional suffering which characterise Raphael's. Tsenyeh believes that 'forgetting means leaving behind the parts of yourself that you most need to retrieve in order to go forward'. Luba, she tells Rachel, in agreeing to go to America 'accepted the path of forgetting'. She became both the epitome of womanliness – treated 'like a porcelain doll' (234) by Raphael and his aunt Elka – and a living symbol of the truncated existence of the Holocaust survivor, chronically ill, physically immobile, 'limited... in her ability to care for her husband and children' (67). Illness becomes the correlative of her emotional deadness; in the middle of America's abundance and Raphael's material success Luba exists as a kind of *Schmuckstück*. Rachel, withdrawing into an emotional numbness which echoes both her mother's and her father's, reinvents herself as 'Hannah Who Would Never Let Anybody Hurt Her Again' (176), a child who is 'Cold as the winter, [viewing] the world through the precision of a camera lens' (174). She is rescued by Tsenyeh, who tells her: "'I can't let you escape into your mind! I can see the symptoms. During the war, girls withdrew from the horror by retreating into their thoughts, but the minute they removed themselves from the world, it was all over for them. Once they stopped suffering, they stopped feeling, and once they stopped feeling, they lost their will to live!" (231-2). Tsenyeh was sustained during incarceration by 'brown and white images of the desert' where, if she survived, she would 'build something beautiful and green and impossible' (230), a dream she achieves through emigration and work in the Israeli Kibbutz movement. Just as her testimony reproduces real experience, the narrative implies, her dreams were earthed and thus achievable. She tells Rachel that Raphael's narratives are 'stories like they tell in the movies' – fantasy productions akin to Rachel's own. Survival was 'luck... accident... even... stupidity' (230). If Sucher's narrator represents a contemporary figure of witness-through-the-imagination her concern, as the actual event moves further back into history, appears to be a conscious separation of a more authentic form of testimony – *vision* – from Holocaust story – *version*.

#### 6.6.2 Marisa Kantor Stark: private memory

If Sucher specifically genders Holocaust mythologising as a male strategy for adaptation in a post-Holocaust culture largely uninterested in survivor memory, Stark's novel explores the most private discourse of all, the narrative of atrocity which the woman survivor can only tell herself. This memory represents not re-vision but vision itself, a revisiting of the scene of choiceless choice, which has shaped her identity as a survivor. That Maime is an unreliable narrator – in the present forgetful and confused – does not invalidate, but rather lends credence to these encapsulated memories; in retelling these to herself, Maime is fully articulate. Hers is the closest



fictional voice to the elderly women survivors whose testimonies were examined in chapter 3, some of whom were attempting for the first time consciously to shape their harrowing memories into narrative, many years after the event. Maime represents a narrator deemed unreliable by her culture, to whom – as to the Nazis – elderly women are among the most useless members<sup>11</sup>. Stark makes available to us via fiction those memories which will never otherwise be articulated.

Maime, ninety, a Polish Jewish woman who with her husband Saul emigrated to America after the war, is clearly "not all there", degenerated from the former astute businesswoman who kept herself and her husband Saul afloat during and after the Holocaust. Confined to a nursing home by her nephew, Milton, Maime gives away her wedding ring, preferring a plastic one she won at bingo; she dresses in the same dress, claiming, despite the evidence, that she has no others; she believes her carers steal her underwear. In reality, Maime is 'always there' in the room in which she and Saul made their agonising decision to comply with the Nazis' demand to hand over their old people: 'It don't matter what I'm doing if I'm here in this country and with people or what. It's never all of me. You shouldn't think it's all of me you see here' (184). Just as women were made responsible for the fate of their children, so Maime is made to bear the same guilt for surrendering their elderly parents:

[Saul's] voice is a hot whisper. –Maime, Leibish wants us to hide with him. He has a place. They came to his village, shot his family.

–The whole family? But what about the children? Oh, Gott, no, please don't say the children.

–Yes. We're next, Maime. We have to go with him.

He stops talking, waits for what I will say. But he knows already, there can be only this one thing to say.

–Our parents, Saul. We have our parents.

He was waiting I should be the one to give it words.

–We'll bring them with us, he says.

I laughed and not because it is funny. It's because it is not funny I laughed.

–Tell me, Saul, how are we going to feed so many people? How will we hide your father with his cough and my mother who's like a little child? Tell me that, I'm waiting to hear.

He has no answer. I don't expect he'll have an answer. Because he is a coward, he's thinking to say these things, say we will hide them, and that's all, now whatever happens is from me.

And later he can say it was me (198-9).

Years afterwards, dying, Saul does so. 'He pointed at me, his finger shaking. – You, Maime. I blame you. Do you hear me, I blame you for everything...I said to hide them. All along that's what I said. You know that, don't you, I wanted to hide them? You always knew that' (183). The neat, superficial symmetry the novel offers – Maime allowed her parents to be taken by the Nazis; her nephew Milton abandons her in a home – is disrupted by our knowledge that Maime's lifelong burden of guilt was forced on her: 'it's become the center of my heart. And I see it can't be no other way' (155-6). This subtle acceptance embodies Maime's consciousness of her cultural scapegoating. Her marriage, like Barbara Grünbaum's, silences her. She is blamed for the marriage's childlessness until Saul is found to be sterile; thereafter, the subject is

never mentioned again. Maime cannot defend herself against the charge of barrenness without running counter to cultural requirements of feminine loyalty; equally, she cannot force Saul to share with her the responsibility – and guilt – for articulating the impossibility of hiding their parents. Maime's refusal to escape with Saul from Poland, leaving their parents, reflects a little-discussed aspect of women's gendered jeopardy during the Holocaust.

Maime's passive endurance of the totalitarian atmosphere of the nursing home represents not her need to expiate guilt but her gender acculturation within contemporary American society, which is another form of incarceration and silencing. Maime cannot make herself heard by Milton, by the other inhabitants, thoroughly demoralised as she is herself, by the staff or by various other official visitors, and this echoes her silencing within the thirty-three months in hiding during the Holocaust. She states that 'Not to speak is like to be dead' (123). Her encounter with neo-Nazi graffiti occurs during her desperate attempt to escape from the home and return to her own apartment; now, presumably, sold off by Milton. If we disregard as senile Maime's assertion that 'Hitler is still alive' (106) but with a changed appearance, we miss the parallels the novel draws. Maime's attempt to conceal a swastika drawn on the bench where earlier she sat talking to a black woman can likewise be dismissed as irrational. Yet this neo-Nazi symbol can be seen to support Maime's assertion that Hitler is alive. Her futile gesture now becomes symbolic of the continued powerlessness of those culturally devalued, in the face of racism which is both in the past and the present.

I got up from the bench and that's when I saw it. There on the back where I didn't notice it before, a black swastika. I felt hot all over and then cold and I knew I couldn't leave it there. I tried to rub it with a tissue, my hand was shaking so I couldn't hardly hold it, but I stood for a long time rubbing and rubbing and still it wasn't coming off. All I could think is to put something to cover it.

I don't have nothing with me, only my bag and my sweater, and in my bag there wasn't too much. I was a little bit sorry, because it was my favorite sweater, the rose-colored one with the little pulls at the elbow, but I taked it off and folded it carefully and hanged it over the back of the bench (215).

## 6.7 In conclusion

We have seen, then, that within male fictions women primarily serve as literary stereotypes, whether sexual or cultural. They add nothing to our knowledge about real women's lives in the Holocaust, bearing little or no relation to women's testimonies. To this extent, it can be suggested that male fictions close down any debate about women's experiences of atrocity. Women writers on the other hand attempt to open up this issue, examining not only women's memories but the implications of their experiences on their own lives and on the lives of their children. Ultimately, writers such as Rosen attempt to initiate cultural debate about the implications of atrocity for culture as a whole; we are returned to Adorno's concerns, voiced in



1949. After the Holocaust, Rosen asks, can we afford as a culture to ignore responsibility for atrocity, relegating it to the past and reviewing it only as disturbing imagery? More important, she suggests its use as *stimulating* imagery is one of the more disturbing aspects of our cultural reaction to atrocity. Her concept of Judaizing, of generating an empathic awareness of the Holocaust which is not exploitive, is a way of keeping alive for future writers and researchers a subject which is increasingly jeopardised both by cultural denial, and by the deaths of those who experienced atrocity at firsthand.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Marrus (1993: 6) cites Butterfield, H. *History and Human Relations*, (London, 1951, p. 14-15).

<sup>2</sup> A claim made by Lord Russell of Liverpool for the 1956 Grafton Books edition. Feiner states in *Shivitti: A Vision* that 'On the road from Auschwitz I went back to the ghetto where I had hidden my sister Daniella's Diary' (1998: 19-20). This diary could therefore cover only Daniella's experiences prior to her transportation to Auschwitz, not her incarceration.

<sup>3</sup> Milton cites Hart, K. *Return to Auschwitz*, (New York, 1982, p. 122).

<sup>4</sup> The passage quoted from Styron does indeed bear affinities with descriptions of oral sex to be found in Pauline Réage's narrative (see *The Story of O*, Corgi, 1994, p. 30).

<sup>5</sup> Kurzman (1993: 29) translates Zydowska Organizacja Bojowa (ZOB) as the Jewish Fighting Organisation.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., pp. 46, 59.

<sup>7</sup> Wolfgang Sofsky (1997: 14) defines thick descriptions as 'analyses of meaning' which 'do not provide protocols of events but rather interpretations of actions and situations; not reports, but explications of structures and processes. Thick descriptions present a reading of the meaning of what has happened. They are interpretive and microscopic; not deductive and generalizing'. Daniel Goldhagen (1996: 7) defines thick description as the 'unearthing' of lives rather than 'the customary paper-thin, description of... actions'.

<sup>8</sup> Ezrahi (1982: 34-5) cites the work of Jewish historian Salo Baron, "Newer Emphases in Jewish History" (*History and Jewish Historians*, Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia, 1964, pp. 96, 94).

<sup>9</sup> Jackel Eberhard (Berenbaum and Peck (eds.), 1998: 24-5) currently identifies a division in Holocaust historical scholarship between what he terms 'the "intentionalists" and the "functionalists"', where the former believe that genocide expressed 'Hitler's premeditated intention... to kill as many Jews as possible'. The functionalists see the Holocaust as evolving far more under its own momentum, far less from a central mind: 'the anti-Jewish measures... steadily intensified until they finally and almost automatically culminated in the mass killings'.

<sup>10</sup> See Cesarani, D. "History on Trial", in *The Guardian* 2, Tuesday, 18 January 2000, p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> Joan Ringelheim (Rittner and Roth (eds.) 1993: 397) states that elderly women were 'clearly some of the most useless persons to the Nazis and in that category were to be killed immediately'.



## Chapter 7

### CONCLUSION

This thesis has set out to re-examine Holocaust literature in the light of the recent historical research suggesting that women's experiences *as women* during the Holocaust have received little notice (see chapter 1). It is only in the last two decades that works by women critics have begun to examine women's narrative from a gendered perspective. Lillian Kremer, for instance, summarises the differing experiences which structure women's narratives while Marlene Heinemann has suggested that within women's narratives, whether autobiographical or fictional, two radically different voices – self-dramatising and self-effacing – can be identified.

Male critics – largely without making reference to gender – have likewise found Holocaust narrative to be radically self-divided. Lawrence Langer broadly classifies self-dramatising narrative, impelled to some degree by a desire to represent incarceration as a spiritual testing-ground for the individual, as a *version* of Holocaust survival. Conversely, the self-effacing narrative represents a *vision* of incarceration relatively free from the need to represent suffering as individually meaningful (see chapter 2, p. 13). However, if Holocaust narrative is examined from the perspective of gender, important differences can be identified which modify these classifications. Where the self-dramatising voice appears in female narrative – although it does so rarely – it is invariably in the context of a wider representation of women as affiliative, endeavouring to mitigate the ordeal of incarceration by the use of bonding and domestic skills regarded as typically feminine. Male narrative, both self-dramatising and self-effacing, is likewise culturally marked, representing the ordeal as the struggle for survival of the individual against the Nazis and his fellow incarcerated alike.

One can suggest, then, that Holocaust narrative is indelibly marked by the gender of the writer (see chapter 2, p. 28). In chapter 3 of this work, it was argued that these differing ways in which women represent their experiences are not specific to the genre of Holocaust autobiography, but rather are typical of those identified within women's autobiographical writing in general (see chapter 3, pp. 51-5). Conventional narrative frameworks are largely 'the products of a culture dominated by men'; women's lives can only be narrated 'in the resistance to and transgression of' these 'unavoidable frameworks with their male assumptions and prescriptions' (van Alphen, 1997: 68). Women's issues are marginalised in a 'mutually

· reinforcing relation' whereby canonisation exerts pressures to exclude that which interrogates the canonical (LaCapra, 1994: 23). Women's testimonies, in this view, are intrinsically transgressive, whatever their content. It has been argued that in any case that the Holocaust itself can scarcely be accommodated within the typical war story of 'heroic masculinity' (van Alphen, 1997: 3).

That gender differences must necessarily constitute an important aspect of Holocaust narrative becomes self-evident when one applies to gender the insights of critics such as James Young, who have maintained that the writer's cultural perceptions have shaded not only literary responses to atrocity but organised the writers' actual responses to the threats against them. For him, it is 'interpretation', rather than the 'putative factuality' of narrative, which may constitute its 'authentic truth' (1990: 36). Dori Laub goes so far as to suggest that this interpretive faculty which testimonies possess may act as a vital adjunct to the factual documentation traditionally privileged by historians. Testimony often shows that events which the historian, with hindsight, deems insignificant possessed enormous importance for the prisoners themselves (1992: 61-2). For Tony Kushner, this historical privileging appears to have a gender bias. In the study of the Holocaust, the 'historical profession in the post-war world' tended towards a 'concentration on dominant men'; 'A form of machismo was at work, shown in the preference for perpetrator evidence and a concentration on the "hard" world of the male mass murderer' (1994: 4). Sara Horowitz argues that a similar gender bias operates towards male testimony (see chapter 1, p. 1); this seems so even today within the fast-expanding area of Holocaust remembrance<sup>1</sup>. Women's presence in the Holocaust as *women* still appears less conceptualised than many other groups<sup>2</sup>, who are becoming the focus of increasingly detailed studies<sup>3</sup>. As this thesis has shown, critical writing such as Langer's as late as 1998 (see chapter 2, p. 14) maintains that gender played a *diminished* role in the Holocaust; research for this work as late as January 2001 suggests that influential sources of information on the Holocaust still do not reflect the findings of historians such as Carol Rittner and John Roth, writing as long ago as 1993<sup>4</sup>.

This thesis has maintained, then, that women do represent incarceration in distinctive ways, even if such representations receive far less attention in Holocaust narrative criticism. These distinctive elements are clearly to be seen in narratives from the immediate postwar years to the unpublished testimonies collected within the last fifteen years which form the focus of chapter 3. However, it is when autobiographies are transformed into fiction that the greatest differences between male and female representations of the Holocaust become evident.

While there exists still an 'overwhelming suspicion of literary or artistic representations of the Holocaust' (van Alphen, 1997: 17; this work, chapter 2, p. 22), fictional accounts of women's incarceration possess the crucial advantage in being able to articulate those abuses which women still cannot bring themselves to speak about<sup>5</sup>. A writer such as Susan Fromberg



Schaeffer can articulate the obscenities used against women (see chapter 4, p. 130) which, as Ester Brunstein states, 'I even now cannot repeat' (Appendix III: 31). She can interrogate male-authored descriptions of, for instance, women's ordeal of surrendering children<sup>6</sup>.

So far as women's experiences go, however, this research suggests that male fiction writers make far less use of women's autobiographical writings than do women fiction writers, and the way in which they depict women comes closest to misusing Holocaust material as critics define misuse (see chapter 2, p. 26). While critics such as Alvin Rosenfeld and Omer Bartov have objected to the pornographic content of such fictions as Ka-Tzetnik 135633's and William Styron's<sup>7</sup>, critical concern lies rather with their falsification of Holocaust history. Such critics do not suggest that these depictions replicate the sort of gender stereotypes to be found in the Gothic novel, among other genres; they eliminate the ways in which women represent themselves in autobiographies of survival. The utilisation of other traditional fictional female stereotypes, perhaps no less damaging because equally inauthentic, in mainstream fiction likewise appears to have escaped critical notice. This thesis suggests that such stereotypes can be co-opted for a variety of reasons: to domesticate atrocity and render it more comprehensible, as in Jean-François Steiner's *Treblinka*, or to add a sexual dimension to an otherwise asexual text, under the guise of offering the reader the possibility of a redemptive ending, as does John Hersey in *The Wall*. Rosenfeld maintains – arguably with little historical justification – that this incorporation of sexuality is unjustified in terms of Holocaust history; yet neither he nor other critics suggest that the use of female stereotypes represents a particular falsification of *women's* history. This thesis argues that such awareness has yet to manifest itself in mainstream Holocaust criticism.

In chapter 6, it is argued that fiction written by women attempts fully to make use of women's experiences within the Holocaust. Women's fictions such as Norma Rosen's refute the use of stereotypes in fictions of the Holocaust; Rosen makes explicit the pornographic misuse of women's suffering. She also challenges the domestication of the Holocaust where a male culture allocates to women the task of redeeming atrocity. She and Cheryl Sucher provide a metacritique of narratives which, while presenting themselves as genderless, in reality portray atrocity from the viewpoint of a male-authored culture. Marisa Stark's narrator above all embodies the alienation and marginalisation of the woman Holocaust survivor within this culture.

Women fiction writers, then, bear out the claims made by researchers (see chapter 1, p. 12) that a "master" narrative of Holocaust survival – supposed genderless – is inadequate to describe women's experiences. Research for this thesis suggests that at present such writers appear more willing to pay heed to the autobiographical voices of women who survived the Holocaust than do male writers, whether in the field of Holocaust fiction or scholarship. Women fiction writers suggest that the second generation writer, in transmitting material about the



Holocaust, must be attentive to differences in the narratives of male and female survivors, sifting the authentic voice from that which mythologises unbearable experience in order to re-establish an identity, and to achieve some measure of autonomy and control over the life afterwards. Van Alphen suggests that 'In Western patriarchal society masculine subjectivity depends much more thoroughly on the construction of an independent, initiating subjectivity'. Subjectivity is not 'a fixed, universal category, but a social construction'; when, as in incarceration, it had to be abandoned 'masculinity is impaired in its very essence' (1997: 49). Sucher and others suggest that mythologising survival may be an overcompensation for the destruction in the Holocaust of these traditional ideologies of masculinity. Van Alphen argues that women 'could more easily renounce their subjectivity because in the cultures they came from their independence and subjective strength had been limited anyway'. He goes as far as to suggest that 'This gender difference in constructions of subjectivity can even be used to explain why men died much sooner in the camps than women' even though 'life in the camps was usually much harder for women than for men'; women had less difficulty adapting psychologically to the loss of individual identity (49).

This claim aside, in narrating the Holocaust this thesis argues that the historical fidelity to be found in women's autobiographical narratives, and in their fictions, can be accounted for by their having less investment in cultural ideologies of individual identity than have men. It is here that the central difference between men's and women's Holocaust narratives resides. Male narrative fundamentally engages in a dialogue about the fate of individual subjectivity in the concentration camp. On the one hand – in what Langer terms *versions* of Holocaust survival – it insists that the human self can retain its integrity and transcend suffering by an effort of spiritual will; in extreme cases, this superior spiritual strength is claimed directly to aid survival. On the other, within what Langer terms Holocaust *vision*, it is argued that this sense of individual identity, a primary target for the SS, was swiftly broken within the concentration camp. The inmate's reduction to a state of depersonalised isolation launched him on a Darwinian struggle for survival. Whichever viewpoint the male writer adopts – the extremely self-dramatising stance of Viktor Frankl or Bruno Bettelheim, or the correspondingly self-effacing stance of Levi – this individuality, in the sense in which van Alphen intends it, is always the locus of the struggle to survive. What structures male narrative is not so much individual survival as the survival of individuality, and in what form.

In women's narratives, this dialogue is more muted, when it makes itself heard at all. Whether relatively self-dramatising, as is Fania Fénelon's, or extremely self-effacing, as is Charlotte Delbo's, women writers are primarily concerned with the female body as the site of atrocities committed by the Nazis. Consequently, the body, rather than some ideal construction of the self, is the locus of women's attempts to preserve life, whether their own, those of relatives or members of their "camp families" or even strangers (see Appendix VIII: 121). From reading women's Holocaust narrative, fictional or non-fictional, one gains a sense that there is a



far closer relationship between the feminine body and the individual self than exists between the body and the self in male narrative. Here, the self does indeed appear rather as an abstract cultural construction. Thus the emphasis in women's narrative is rather on practical strategies devised to ameliorate, in however small a way, the everyday physical horrors for the body of women who share incarceration.

<sup>1</sup> Andrea Dworkin, protesting the dearth of information on women in the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, was given 'research materials that demonstrated the museum's commitment to documenting the egregious persecution of homosexuals; included were biographies of eight gay men and one lesbian' (1997: 242). Yet the volume entitled *The Holocaust and History: The Known, the Unknown, the Disputed and the Reexamined* (Berenbaum, M. and Peck, A. J. (Eds.), United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, in association with Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1998) published following the museum's first conference in 1993 – a work which runs to some 800 pages – 'eliminated women altogether by disappearing the one lesbian' (242).

<sup>2</sup> Joan Ringelheim (Ofer and Weitzman, 1998: 347) states that 'the Permanent Exhibition of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum contains no conceptualization of women during the Holocaust. In brief segments of the exhibition, one can ponder the roles of Freemasons, Roma and Sinti (Gypsies), homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses, and political prisoners, but not women'; they are 'conceptually invisible' in the design of the permanent exhibition whose 'fundamental meaning' is to offer a conception of the 'Jewish people' in the Holocaust.

<sup>3</sup> There is a section in Berenbaum and Peck's volume entitled "Multiple Voices: Ideology, Exclusion, and Coercion" concerned with the 'discrimination' against 'Jewish Mischlinge, Gypsies and Gypsy Mischlinge... and Germans married to Jews or Mischlinge' and even 'the descendants of a few thousand mixed blacks' whose origins were in the French occupation of the Rhineland (Grenville in Berenbaum and Peck (eds.) 1998: 318). Joan Ringelheim states of the conference which gave rise to this volume that in 'a four-day event with eighteen panels and eighty participants, sixteen of them women... Not one lecture concerned women or gender. When this omission was questioned, the answer sheepishly offered was, "We forgot." This answer was given even though panels on the issue of gender were proposed to the planning committee' (Ofer and Weitzman, 1998: 346).

<sup>4</sup> The U.S. Memorial Museum, for instance, has a 300-word résumé on women in the Holocaust, available through its Internet site. Dated January 2001, it brackets together Jewish and Romani women as if the histories of their incarceration contained no fundamental differences. It covers incarceration, resistance and women's political activism outside the camps; it augments this information with only four cross-references, none of them gender-specific: "*Einsatzgruppen*", "Bergen-Belsen", "forced labour" and "Jewish parachutists". Its coverage of women is too brief and general to be of real value. Its statement that 'Pregnant women sometimes received especially brutal treatment such as beatings and forced abortions' in the ghettos and camps borders on the inaccurate in the absence of information that noticeably pregnant women were rarely admitted to the concentration camp. If they were admitted, when their pregnancy was detected they were invariably gassed. The résumé makes no mention of the rule which decreed that women with young children be gassed for no other reason than that they were mothers (<http://wlc.ushmm.org/wlc/article.jsp>).

<sup>5</sup> Andrea Dworkin suggests that it is only in the last two decades that 'feminists have learned how to talk with raped, prostituted and tortured women – what they need to be able to speak, how to listen to them' (1997: 249). Joan Ringelheim details her experience with a woman she was interviewing about her incarceration in Auschwitz, who 'suddenly said, "I was raped in Auschwitz." She added that the incident was her fault and that she was not gang-raped'. Ringelheim 'tried to counsel her... to convince her that it wasn't her fault' and encouraged her to talk at a later stage, 'perhaps in six months'. Ringelheim confesses that 'not only did I not ask for the details of what had happened but I also made it impossible for Susan to continue'. In fact, it was 'a few years' before Ringelheim reinterviewed the woman about this specific ordeal (Ofer and Weitzman (eds.), 1998: 341).



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<sup>6</sup> For Tadeusz Borowski's description, see this thesis, chapter 1, p. 4-5. A comparison can be made with Fromberg Schaeffer's narration of the same scene; see this thesis, chapter 4, p. 129-30.

<sup>7</sup> For Rosenfeld's criticism of Styron's *Sophie's Choice* see this thesis, chapter 6, p. 145-6; for Bartov's discussion of pornography in Ka-Tzetnik's writing, see chapter 6, p. 144.

# GLOSSARY

*Appell, appel, Zahlappel*: Roll-call.

*Anweiserin*: prisoner-overseer.

*Aufseherin*: prisoner-trusty.

*Blockälteste*: the prisoner who acted as senior block overseer.

"Canada", "*Kanada*": the nickname given to the locations within Auschwitz and Auschwitz-Birkenau where clothing from gassed or killed inmates was sorted and mended for sending on into Germany. Baumel (1998, 99 n.43) attributes the name to the idea that Canada the country was 'a source of natural wealth similar to the vast quantities of goods brought into the camp by the incoming inmates and housed in those barracks'.

"Cousin", "*Kuzyn*": male protector of female prisoner: usually a prisoner in a privileged position.

*Einsatzgruppen*: mobile mass execution squads operating in Eastern Europe and Russia; often incorporating local manpower.

*Hashomer Hatsair, Hashomir Hatzair, Ha-shomer ha-Za'ir*. Jewish radical (Zionist) youth movement.

*Judenrat*: Jewish Councils of Elders appointed in the ghettos.

*Mogen Dovid*: the Jewish Star of David.

*Musselmän, Mussulmän; Musselmänner* (female: *Schmückstück*): in camp argot, an inmate too far gone physically and mentally to be able to recover; one destined within days for death or selection.

"Organise": to steal or barter extra provisions, food or clothing, for oneself or others.

*Schmuckstück; Schmuckstücke*: Levi states that this term had a deliberately blurred meaning, a conflation of *Schmutztück* (garbage) and *Schmuckstück* (jewel), the one a parody of the other (Levi, 1989: 77). Koonz (1987: 380) translates it as derisory Nazi slang: "'pretty pieces'".

*Sonderkommando*: prisoners working in the gas chambers.

"Standing six". The prisoner allocated the position of lookout at a workshop entrance by the other prisoners when an overseer was absent was given an agreed code-word to call out to warn the prisoners of the approach of the overseer or any member of the German hierarchy. Usually this was a number, such as "Six".

*Strafappell*: a punishment *appell*; typically gymnastics or crouching or kneeling in freezing conditions, in snow or on gravel, for many hours.

Z.O.B: *Zydowska Organizacja Bojowa*, the Jewish Fighting Organisation.

*Zugang, Zugangi*: new arrivals in Auschwitz-Birkenau. Levi states that in German it is 'an abstract, administrative term' meaning access or entry (1989: 24).



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## VI. THESES AND DISSERTATIONS

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